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MYRTLE

THE CHILD OF THE PRAIRIE.

BY MRS. M. V. VICTOR,

AUTHOR OF THE FOLLOWING DIME NOVELS:

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THE CHILD OF THE PRAIRIE.

CHAPTER I.

THE CITY OF WAKWAKA.

"**MERCY!** what have we here?"

As he uttered this exclamation, Hugh Fielding pulled at his horse's bridle so suddenly that the animal was very nearly thrown upon his haunches, which was fortunate, for, had he taken another step forward, it would have been into the bosom of a little child asleep and alone upon the prairie.

The rider remained in his saddle a moment, gazing with astonishment down upon the ground where, half-covered by the tall grass and gorgeous blossoms, this vision had startled him. The infant, not more than a year of age apparently, was a little girl in a white frock, the sleeves of which were looped up with corals; she had round, rosy limbs, and a sweet face. A few flowers were grasped in one hand, the other was under her cheek; one shoe was on, the other lost, while her little mantle of blue silk was crumpled beneath her feet. As if in protection, a rose-bush leaned over her, from some of whose fullest blossoms the leaves had dropped into her golden hair.

It was not strange that Mr. Fielding was surprised, for he was eighteen miles from any habitation; and his piercing eye, darting its glances in every direction, could detect not the slightest trace of any other human being. He dismounted from his horse and took the little one in his arms, who opened

a pair of bright eyes and looked vaguely around, then wistfully into his face.

"Mamma!" she cried, in a plaintive voice, again and again, but she did not otherwise cry, or make those active demonstrations of grief which her finder dreaded.

Hugh was a man of thirty-three, and ought to have been the father of several such pretty creatures of his own; but he was a bachelor, reserved, taciturn, "unskilled in all the arts and wiles" of soothing infants. He was touched almost to tears by the evident grief and forlornness of the little thing. She seemed to pine with hunger, too. He placed her upon the saddle, while he examined the contents of a brown bag which he had stored with provisions at the last settlement. Dried venison, hard bread—ah, here were some soda-crackers!—sorry food for the baby that was still perhaps dependent upon a mother's bounty for sustenance. But she was too hungry to be particular; she seized upon the cracker, and ate it with a relish, and, after finishing what was given her, looked at her new friend and smiled. That confiding smile went straight to his heart and stirred in it a new sensation.

What was to be done? Of course, he thought not for an instant of abandoning the child to the destruction of solitude; but a baby-girl was not the most desirable companion for a man going into a new country to hunt and fish, and dwell alone wherever his fancy might prompt him to wander. A sudden thought that the parents might also be sleeping somewhere in the vicinity, improbable as it was, occurred to him; and he forthwith halloed so lustily that his charge began to cry with fright, when he left off and began soothing her, patting her golden head, with some rather ineffectual efforts at baby-talk.

Mounting his horse again, and keeping her in his arms, he took a circuit of a mile around the spot, hoping to find the lost guardians. But the tiny shoe which mated the one upon her foot, and a blue ribbon-sash hanging upon the thorns of a rose-bush, were all that he discovered.

Something in the color of the blue scarf, and something in the color of the baby's eyes, which were a soft, bright, dark hazel, reminded him of a history in his past life which it was a part of his purpose in coming West to forget. He thought

it very ridiculous in himself to connect things so remote from each other, even in fancy; nevertheless, he drew the child closer to his heart and spoke to it in the softest tone of his deep and musical voice.

But what was to be done? The sun was going down behind the earth as into a sea of emerald and jasper. He had meant to pass the prairie before night; but now he thought it best to remain where he was, in the faint hope that some one would come to claim his charge. He had come upon a little brook trickling through the grass in a gully, as he described the circle of a mile, with a little clump of trees to which he could fasten his horse, making it a desirable place upon which to camp out. Here he alighted and began preparations for the night. His little companion, left to herself upon the grass, commenced again her plaintive cry after "mamma, mamma!" Occasionally, in the course of preparing his supper, he would try to beguile her away from the one desire which yearned in her forlorn little heart, but in vain. Like a dove moaning in the wilderness, she kept up her sorrowful cry. A few sticks broken from the dead branch of a tree furnished him with materials for a fire, which he kindled upon the ground, the prairie grass being too green to endanger its burning. In a little tin-pot he boiled a cup of tea, a portion of which he sweetened for the child, but she was too much grieved to be induced to partake of it. His steed, who had quenched his thirst in the stream, cropped at his leisure the fragrant blossoms and rich verdure about his feet.

By the time the meal of tea, toasted crackers, and dried meat was over, twilight had descended over the scene and the infant had sobbed her poor, weary little self to sleep. Mr. Fielding took a blanket from his portmanteau, and, being nearly as tired as she, took the sleeper to his bosom tenderly, wrapped the blanket about them, and, with some of their traps for a pillow, disposed himself for the night.

Before slumber stole upon his conjectures, he had concluded that the mystery might be accounted for by the fact that the Indians had lately been troublesome, and that there were reports at the last settlements of their having been seen prowling about the neighborhood for the past few days.

How sad and terrible it must be if some emigrant family had

been attacked by them, the father murdered, the mother borne off into slavery, and the child left to perish! What agony must not that mother at this moment be enduring! Was she young and beautiful? Had she eyes like those of the infant whose soft breath played over his cheek? There had been no traces of any murderous struggle about the spot where he found the babe; but they might have taken it with them some distance and thrown it away at last, because it impeded their flight. Thus mused the traveler until his fancies melted into indistinct visions; and, with only his horse for guard and his gun for defense, he slumbered as sweetly upon the wide plain as he had ever done in the spacious halls of a luxurious civilization.

A kiss upon his cheek and the caress of a soft hand awoke him in the morning; and he dreamed for a blissful moment that he was a married man.

"*Dear Myrtle,*" he said, in a rapturous tone, at which the baby laughed, as if familiar with the name, thereby awakening him to a sense of his situation. Quickly the sweet dream vanished; and, as he sprang to his feet, ready dressed, for a moment a cloud of pain was upon his brow; but it faded presently as he became absorbed in his culinary preparations, while his companion sat upon the blanket and watched his movements with a pretty curiosity.

After breakfast, the two resumed their journey, Mr. Fielding thinking it useless to wait there any longer. The child sat quietly in front of him, seeming to enjoy the ride, and yet musing over some secret grief of her own; but she had no language by which to tell either her grief or sorrow, except her one word, "mamma."

The hot July sun was very endurable to Mr. Fielding, who was almost a world-wide traveler. But he observed that it scorched the lovely face of his companion, who had no bonnet to shelter her from its rays; so he contrived an impromptu shade out of his handkerchief.

It was nearly noon when they reached the city of Wakwaka, which was, for the present, the destination of the travelers. As they left the prairie and ascended a slight eminence which gave them a view of the town and surrounding scenery, Hugh reined in his horse and gazed for a while upon the

novel prospect. A long, river-like lake, whose bright blue waters lay smooth beneath the cloudless sky, flowed along between high banks of singular beauty. These bluff-like banks stretched back into narrow emerald plains, from which rose again beautiful wooded hills, between which he could catch glimpses of another glorious prairie beyond. At the foot of the eminence upon which he now was, along the south bank as smooth and fair as a terrace, lay the fifty houses which composed the present *city* of Wakwaka. About half of these were of canvas, gleaming whitely in the sunlight; the rest were of boards put rudely together, and three or four brick buildings which did not seem completed. The fact is, this ambitious and flourishing town had not been in existence six months before, its exact age being five months and one week. The virgin beauty of the lake-shore was already defaced by a dock, from which a little steamboat had just puffed cheerily away, leaving the group of men who had gathered at the landing to look after her a few moments, and then turn again to their different employments.

Mr. Fielding spurred up his horse and rode down along the street, taking, as he passed along with his gun on his shoulder and a baby in his arms, the place of the departed steamer in the interest and curiosity of the people.

It is doubted if any in the motley crowd who had gathered from various impulses of self-interest in that new city, could more truly be called adventurers than the couple who now made their way to the principal and in truth the only hotel. It was Hugh Fielding's business to seek adventure; and, as for the little girl, she, alas, by some strange and mysterious fortune, had been cast into a unique situation which promised only singular experiences.

The theater chosen for her first appearance in her new part seemed altogether appropriate. It was a stage upon which almost any new drama might be performed with unprecedented success. The cloth houses, the sound of hammers, the flag fluttering from the top of the one-story hotel, the rattle of an omnibus, the distant hills, the lovely lake, the flowers and berries growing upon the very street of the city, formed no more strange a jumble of objects than her life might form of events.

The arrival of a new-comer, though of constant occurrence, was still a matter of intense interest to the dwellers in Wak-waka; and the crowd upon the landing proceeded across the way and gathered about the front of the hotel to welcome with inquisitive eyes the approach of the strangers.

Hugh was not a man to be embarrassed even by the novel charge held so gently in his arm. One glance upon the group of shrewd, speculative, yet cool faces about him, revealed to him the elements upon which the rapidity of Western civilization depends.

He smiled slightly as he glanced at the house built of rough boards with canvas wings, like some strange, unfeathered bird just settled from a flight, and thought of how he had often rested beneath the shadow of the Coliseum.

"Have our new house done next week—that brick yonder," said the landlord, who already had his horse by the bridle, as he detected the smile.

"Have you any women in the house?" asked Hugh.

"Lots of them," was the ready response.

"Well, take this child in, and have them provide some bread-and-milk for her, if you please."

The curiosity expressed in the neighboring faces gave place to a look of admiration as he took his handkerchief from the head of the little girl. The extreme beauty of her infant countenance delighted even the coarsest in the crowd. Her golden hair curled up in short, shining ringlets, which hung like a garland about her head, the crown of her exquisite loveliness. She shrank and clung to her protector when the landlord went to take her; but when Hugh asked her to go, she obeyed. A woman, who had been looking from a window, was already at the door to take her within and minister to her comfort.

Mr. Fielding, as he dismounted, found himself in a group of men, most of them intelligent, many educated, all ready to ask after the world they had left, and to give all the information desired about their new home and its prospects. He soon related the story of the child's being found by him, and it was unanimously concluded that its parents had fallen a prey to some revengeful Indians who did not dare open warfare, but sometimes attacked unprotected emigrants. Great

pity and interest were felt; and twenty fiery hearts blazed up with a determination to hunt out and punish the marauders, if any traces of them could be found. The next thing proposed was that each man present should subscribe a sum toward the proper support and education of the Child of the Prairie (as one imaginative person proposed she should be called); and several hundred dollars were offered on the spot. But Mr. Fielding, with many thanks for their generosity, told them that, although he was, and always expected to be, a bachelor, and had hitherto regarded children as rather needless and unjustifiable intruders upon people's time and comfort, yet, as Providence had thrown this one in his way, and he was very well able to provide for her, and already loved the motherless little creature, he should himself see that she was well taken care of.

A low cheer of approval broke from some of the young men and they gathered about the windows and doors to get another peep at the pretty heroine who was being lionized by all the females of the house.

Hugh only waited to shake the dust of travel off him, and partake of the dinner waiting upon a long table in the canvas dining-hall, before he went to inquire after his charge. She had eaten her bread and milk, and was sitting in her nurse's lap very patiently, making no trouble, but with two great tears glittering upon her eyelids, ready to fall. When she saw Hugh, she laughed, and came eagerly to his arms. It was evident that she was a delicate flower, to be guarded from too broad sunshine and too severe storms. She seemed dismayed to receive so much attention from strangers, and clung to him with an affection which made him feel how impossible it was for him to abandon her.

"What are you going to name her?" asked one.

"I believe I shall call her Myrtle," replied Hugh.

"What makes you give her such an out-of-the-way name as that?" said another. "Mary would be much more to my mind."

"It was the name of a friend of mine," he answered; "and, besides, the meaning of Myrtle is 'love'—a pretty meaning for a child's or a woman's name; though the name does not always indicate the character," he added, with a sigh.

"As true as I am born," said the first speaker, "if the initial on the clasp of her corals is not 'M!' But, of course, her name must have been Mary."

"Of course it was," added the second.

"I think Myrtle will be very pretty," said a sweet voice in the corner.

Hugh looked that way.

"Do you know, madam," he inquired, "where I could find some kind woman who would take care of her a few days until I get my plans somewhat arranged? She shall be well rewarded."

"I will take her with pleasure, and wish no reward, of course. She will be company for me," answered the lady.

With this pleasant person, who was the young bride of a lawyer who had come out to take advantage of the making of a new country, and whose winning ways were well suited to soothe the timid child, Mr. Fielding left his little Myrtle

CHAPTER II.

MR. FIELDING'S ESTABLISHMENT.

A WEEK from thence Mr. Fielding was settled to his heart's content. He had succeeded in purchasing three hundred acres lying along the shores of the lake, and including some of its most romantic portions, at a distance of not more than two miles from the city. It was not his intention to live in any community, unless it were a community of pheasants, partridges, deer, and wild-turkeys; and, if it had not been for his finding of baby Myrtle, he would have camped out until cold weather, making excursions of several days' length.

It was the fresh and wonderful loveliness of the pure water and its surrounding scenery, looking as if here for untold years nature had made one of her sweetest retiring-places, that induced him to stop near Wakwaka.

In a sheltered nook, protected from any stray winds which might prove too strong for it, and overlooking the water at its most beautiful point, he erected his canvas house. The opposite shore was lined with a wooded bank, a hill peering over its shoulder in the distance; and he had but to walk a few steps from the door to look down one of the loveliest vistas in the world of prairie-land, broken by clumps of trees, and glittering for a time with a silvery edge of water.

Mr. Fielding was a little tinged with misanthropy—as much so as a man of his mingled dignity and generosity of character could be—and there may have been some very good reason for it. Certainly he did not look like a person to whom misanthropy came by nature or inheritance.

He had intended to live alone; but his finding of that stray waif upon the prairie had altered his determination. So he had two rooms to his impromptu house, one of which was occupied by a neat old lady who had consented to take charge of his domestic affairs, including little Myrtle.

For a man who had criticised the palaces of the Old World, his apartment could not be said to display that love of beauty which was one of the strong elements of his character. A bedstead—whose posts, so far from being polished by the hand of art, wore still the shining bark with which nature had dressed them—was fitted to receive the buffalo-skin and blankets heaped upon it. A shot-gun and light rifle hung upon the wall, except when out with their owner; and the traps of a hunter and the clothes of a gentleman filled the little room indiscriminately. But, upon a home-made table in a corner, some glimpses of a finer taste were apparent. Perhaps a dozen favorite books of poetry and philosophy were piled upon it, a flute lay by their side, and a brown stone mug in the center was never without its bouquet of wild-flowers.

The other half of the house was kitchen and parlor; and nobody would guess that it was bedroom also, during the night, did they not notice a little frame with blankets inside turned up snugly against the wall in the corner furthest from the stove.

"I declare, Mrs. Muggins, this is really delightful!" said Mr. Fielding, in his earnest, pleasant way, the first evening they sat down to tea.

A cool wind blew over the lake and in at the door; woodland and water glowed in the sunset light; and he could see it all from his place at the table.

A white cloth was on the board, and a brace of pheasants, and fish from the lake, and golden corn pone upon that; and upon one side sat the smart old lady, pouring tea into two little cups of blue earthenware, her clean cap on, and her eyes stealing satisfied glances at the perfection with which the fish was "done brown." And, loveliest sight of all, at the other side, in a high chair, bought in the city, with her bowl of bread and milk before her, sat the beautiful baby Myrtle, smiling over at her friend, and shedding sunshine over the place by her bright, innocent countenance.

Mrs. Muggins probably thought that her companion referred entirely to the looks of the dishes before him.

"I am glad if you like my cooking, Mr. Fieldin'; I've generally ben reckoned a purty good hand at it," she answered, complacently.

"I do like your cooking," he responded, emphatically, as he helped himself to pheasant. "And I like the quiet of this place, too; so serene, so beautiful. If one had only traveled to Switzerland or Italy in search of it, he would go crazy with rapture; but, as it is only American, I suppose it can not be compared. I think I shall like this way of living very much, Mrs. Muggins; and, if you and Myrtle like it as well as I, I think we shall get along admirably."

"Nobody 'll complain of *you*, if they don't," said his housekeeper. "You must feel e'en a'most as if you was the father of that child; and a beauty she be, poor thing! She's no more trouble than nothing. The ladies at the tavern made her plenty of clothes, and I've only to take care of them. Did you say you had never been married, Mr. Fieldin'?"

"Never, to my knowledge."

"I declare, that's cur'us! Such a likely man too."

"I suppose that I ought to be married," was the light reply; "but, with you to attend to my comfort, and this little creature here to care for, I think I must get excused."

"Did you ever meet with a disappointment?" asked Mrs. Muggins.

The gentleman looked down suddenly into his cup and commenced stirring his tea.

"Perhaps," he answered. "What if I had?"

"Nothin', only I don't think you desarved it. I guessed as much when I heard you a playin' on that fife afore supper—it sounded so heart-broken like."

"Quite a compliment to my playing; but I assure you I am far from heart-broken. There is not a sounder-hearted man in Wakwaka. And remember, Mrs. Muggins, I have not confessed to a disappointment."

So saying, having finished his tea, he took Myrtle in his arms, and went and sat in the door of his own room.

"The girl must have ben a fool who cheated him," murmured the old lady, as she washed up the tea-things; "but as like as not she died."

In the mean time, Hugh sat holding the child on his knee talking to her lovingly, and trying to learn her to say some words. Something in her dark eyes of a peculiar, smiling sweetness thrilled him, as if once more he gazed into the eyes

of an older Myrtle whom he had tried to banish from his thoughts for five long years :

“ But still her footsteps in the passage,
Her blushes at the door,
Her timid words of maiden welcome
Come back to him once more.”

The spell of memory was irresistible. He looked earnestly into the face of the child, covered her forehead with kisses, and, drawing her golden head to his bosom, sang her softly to sleep, while he abandoned himself to the past, which returned to him as if it were of yesterday. Again Myrtle Vail, the girl of eighteen, stood before him, the blush upon her fair cheek creeping down upon the snowy neck until it lost itself in the shadow of her brown tresses, while her head was slightly bent, and her red lip trembled as she said the word which assured him that he had not bestowed his passionate, but pure and earnest admiration in vain. Again he felt the trembling of the hand he had ventured to prison in his own, and again he won the timid but soulful glance of those sweet eyes as he tempted them to search his.

Again he endured the bitter sorrow of parting with her, as necessary business called him to Europe for a space of nearly two years; and again he endured the far bitterer agony of a return just in time to see her give her hand to a man in every way his inferior—younger, handsomer, perhaps, in an effeminate beauty, but vain, immature, carelessly educated, unfit to call forth the riches of the spirit which he had dreamed floated beneath the service in Myrtle's gentle character. Again he saw the pallor overspread her face, as, looking up, after pronouncing the vows which made her recreant to him, she met his eyes, and thus knew, for the first time, that he had returned.

Here he roused himself from his thoughts. He cared not to trace his abrupt departure from that place and his subsequent restless wanderings.

“ Here I shall find peace, if not happiness,” he murmured. His own voice called him back to the present. Myrtle was asleep upon his breast, and the night air was blowing almost too chilly upon her.

CHAPTER III.

MR. FIELDING'S HABITS AND VISITORS.

JONAH'S gourd, which sprang up and flourished in a night, was rivaled by the city of Wakwaka. Every time Mr. Fielding went to town he was surprised by the improvements so rapidly made. Building materials could not be furnished in the abundance required; and, while good-looking brick stores were going up, and the solid stone foundation for a fine courthouse being laid, cloth houses were still the fashion, and considered very cool and airy summer residences by the most aristocratic.

Foresight was preparing, however, for the winter, as fast as lumber could be obtained, or clay turned into brick, residences more substantial. It was wonderful how the future prospect of elegant, perhaps palatial, mansions, upon the wide and beautifully situated lots they occupied, reconciled delicate ladies, who had once been extremely fastidious, to brave the horrors of canvas and two rooms and all the hardships of a new settlement. Not such hardships as the sturdy pioneers endure who break up the wilderness and cause it to blossom like a rose; for Wakwaka was in daily communication with one of the great arteries of travel of the country, and there was no peril of fear or loneliness, nor privation of any luxuries, except those of elegant furniture and spacious abodes.

"And these we shall have very soon," said the ladies of Wakwaka, as they laughed at their little trials, or consoled with each other upon the absence of accustomed comforts.

And still, attracted by the growing fame of the new city, adventurers came hurrying in from every boat: men of broken-down fortunes; youths of courage and energy, too hopeful and fiery to await the slower chances of an old-settled country; some already rich speculators; and many hardy sons of toil, which last took up the beautiful prairie-land and turned it in

to productive farms without cost or labor more than they would have had to give to cultivated land in most places.

All this hurry, and growth, and strangeness, and joyful expectations produced an excitement unknown and unappreciated where the crust of selfishness and conventionality has hardened. Men were met with hearty grasps of the hand, which gave their hearts as much cheer as it gave their fingers pain. Not that human nature was acted upon by the beautiful influences of Wakwaka to become otherwise than as it always is; selfishness was rampant, no doubt, in many minds, shrewd, cool, and calculating; but large prospects of rapid gains and the absence of old-time formalities had, for a season at least, expanded the hearts of her people.

And it can not be said but that a constant reminder of the lavish generosity and beauty of nature—silently spoken by her blooming prairies rolling one after another into almost infinite distance, her wood-crowned hills, and free, magnificent waters—had some effect upon the souls of those who enjoyed this profusion of her riches.

September, October, and November drifted by in a long, unbroken shower of golden sunshine, giving the new settlers good time to prepare for winter.

Mr. Fielding was not altogether idle during that time. He had his canvas house boarded up, and many little comforts added to it; and sent East for a store of books with which to beguile the winter evenings.

Hunting and fishing were his principal occupations.

Such serene enjoyment had not been his for several years as through that glorious autumn. He was a lover of the beautiful in nature as well as in art. While his physical powers were exercised and invigorated by his out-of-doors life, his spiritual nature was fed with the very honey of existence. Cloudless skies, serene and deep, hung over water and land; rich purple mists hung at morning around the horizon, but at mid-day it was changed to a belt of gold; every few days the prairies changed their hues, now gorgeous with crimson, and anon with yellow, and again with scarlet flowers. It was not so much to startle the partridge out of the long grass, or to chase the deer to the cover of the wood, that he slung his gun upon his shoulder, although he kept the house well supplied

with the choicest game, as it was to be out alone in the midst of boundless and ever-varying beauty, free to dream and to think, while breathing in life of body and liberty of soul.

Sometimes his excursions were several days in length; but a yearning after the sweet smile and prattle of little Myrtle always brought him home sooner than he had anticipated.

Her joyous cry, as she bounded to his arms, was his reward and he fully believed the declaration of Mrs. Miggins that the child always "paled and pined" in his absence.

She had learned to call him "papa;" and Mr. Fielding sometimes laughed aloud in his solitude while fancying the astonishment of his friends in various parts of the world—who had given him up as an incorrigible bachelor, which he intended still to remain—could they have a peep at him in his cabin, with his old-lady housekeeper and his adopted daughter. But he was happier than he had been in their frivolous society.

Fairie-fires, gleaming in the distance, and sweeping near, illuminating the nights with fitful radiance, began to be a feature of the scenery, after the November frosts had parched the grass to the likeness of a rustling sea of jasper.

Mr. Fielding had an imagination which was not proof against splendor and novelty combined; and, upon one occasion, when the lonely night found him wandering over a hill with his gun in his hand, and one of these fires sprang from a distant wood and ran over the prairie until extinguished by contact with the lower edge of the lake, he was guilty of some lines like these:—

THE RED HUNTERS

Out of the wood at midnight
 The swift red hunters came;
 The prairie was their hunting-ground—
 The bisons were their game;
 Their spears were of glittering silver,
 Their crests were of blue and gold;
 Driven by the panting winds of heaven
 Their shining chariots roll'd.

Over that level racing-course—
 Oh, what a strife was there!
 What a shouting! what a threatening cry!
 What a murmur upon the air

Their garments over the glowing wheels
 Stream'd backward red and far.
 They floated their purple banners
 In the face of each pale star.

Under their tread the autumn flowers
 By millions withering lay ;
 Poor things that from those golden wheels
 Could nowhere shrink away !
 Close and crashing together
 The envious chariots roll'd ;
 While anon, before his fellows
 Leap'd out some hunter bold.

Their black hair, thick and lowering
 Above their wild eyes hung,
 And about their frowning foreheads
 Like wreaths of nightshade clung.
 "The bisons, lo, the bisons !"
 They cried and answer'd back.
 The frighten'd creatures stood aghast
 To see them on their track.

With a weary, lumbering swiftness
 They seek the river's side,
 Driven by those hunters from their sleep
 Into its chilling tide.
 Some face the foe, with anguish
 Dilating their mute eyes,
 Till the spears of silver strike them low,
 And dead each suppliant lies.

Now, by the brightening river,
 The red hunters stand at bay—
 Vain their appalling splendor—
 The water shields their prey.
 Into its waves with baffled rage
 They leap in death's despite—
 The golden wheels roll roaring in,
 Leaving the wither'd night.

While Mr. Fielding was copying this effusion the next afternoon, some ladies called to see him ; or rather they said they had come to see Myrtle ; but, when young women walk two miles to call at a house where there is a pretty child and a rich and handsome old bachelor, people are at liberty to draw their own conclusions as to which is the greater attraction. For appearance's sake, however, they praised and petted the little creature, who was pleasing enough to give a coloring to all their admiration ; and did not fail to pay compliments to Mrs. Muggins for the way in which she took care of her

Some bonbons and cakes they had for her, too, which delighted her at the time, and made her ill afterward.

It is a strange fact, that when a gentleman seems to shun their society, and especially with a shade of melancholy about his unsociableness, the ladies are certain to be infatuated with him; and *vice versa*. Whether this arises from sympathy, or a wish to prove one's own attractions and powers upon so indifferent a subject, or from the interest which always clings to any thing mysterious, or from all three combined, who shall say? These four young women could any of them have been surrounded by admirers, and each had her choice out of two or three, without troubling herself to walk out to Mr. Fielding's upon the small chance of attracting his attention. For, as yet, the men were largely in advance, in point of numbers, of the female population of Wakwaka; and, what was better, they were all ready, or nearly ready, to provide for a wife; and thus the girls were in no danger of that forlorn fate which sometimes overtakes spinsters in the older States, where the chances for getting a living are fewer, and from whence all the enterprising young men have gone West.

It may have been the beauty of the afternoon and the beauty of the baby, after all, which led them so far.

"I am so fond of children; and this is such a *sweet* little thing!" cried Miss Minnie Gregg, looking up to the gentleman confidently, and then kissing pretty Myrtle so suggestively; after which, she tossed back her jetty ringlets, and looked up again for sympathy.

Mr. Fielding smiled into her saucy black eyes. He could not help admiring the wiles which he understood.

"She is very lovely in all regards," he said, "and becomes more dear to me all the time. I used to think children were nuisances; but I am glad of the chance which threw this one in my path. She has become my morning-star."

"But don't you think she will need some other feminine influence in molding her character than that of Mrs. Muggins?" asked Miss Bluebird, sentimentally, in too low a tone for the housekeeper's dull ears. "Some one who will take the place of a mother—a refined being—whose looks and tones would—"

"Resemble those of my friend, Miss Bluebird," broke in Minnie Gregg, with the gravity of the wickedest mischief.

"How can you! I declare! I shall be offended with you," cried that lady, blushing, while the others laughed.

Hugh did not laugh: some stern thought seemed to have crossed his genial humor. "No, Miss Bluebird," he answered, almost severely, "I want no influences except those of nature, and of music, and well-chosen books about this child, with such sentiments of truth and fidelity, purity and earnestness of heart, as I can instill into her. She shall be raised outside of society. She shall not be taught vanity and artifice; and then, if she fails in being what I desire, I shall believe that Mother Eve never entirely deserts her children."

For a few moments he was rather taciturn. Miss Minnie rallied from a remark she was afraid was intended as rather personal, and changed the subject.

"Have you heard the news, Mr. Fielding? You have not! You know those horrible Indians that we have all been so afraid of?"

"We?" inquired a fearless-looking girl, who was evidently ready for almost any kind of an impromptu adventure.

"Well, everybody else but you, then—even the men. We are going to have a regiment stationed near us this winter to keep the Indians at a distance. Just think of it—won't it be delightful? The officers will be apt to be such pleasant men, you know. And we shall have balls, of course."

"I had been teasing mother to send me back to our old home for the winter, until I heard of this," said the other girl of the group; "but now I am quite content to stay."

"I wonder why it is that the girls always have such a passion for an epaulet on a man's shoulder," said Mr. Fielding, recovering his equanimity. "The glitter of an officer's insignia will make any man irresistible."

"Because we like our opposites; and soldiers are supposed to be brave as we are weak. We like to be defended," said Miss Bluebird.

"I do not like officers half as well as farmers or hunters," said the brave Miss Thomas, with a saucy glance at Hugh.

"By the way," suddenly exclaimed Minnie Greggs, "I had almost forgotten to tell you what Lieutenant Serles related to me, last evening, about a party who were taken by the Indians. I was telling him about you and little Myrtle. You know the

men who volunteered from here never found any traces of the savages. But the lieutenant says that about that time and place a party of the Indians were known to have made a descent upon two emigrant wagons in the night where they had camped at the edge of a prairie. The helpless families were not dreaming of any danger, for the savages had not been troublesome for a long time, and they supposed their nearness to a settlement was sufficient security. They murdered the two men, hitched the horses to the wagons, and drove off with the women and children until they reached the cover of a deep forest, where they left the wagons, and tying the women to the animals, hurried them off to some secret retreat of theirs far away from here. The child may have been thrown aside as burdensome, or dropped by the mother in attempting to effect her own escape."

"Were the names of those unfortunate persons known?" asked Mr. Fielding, with great interest.

"The elder of the two men was called Parker, I believe, as ascertained at the last village they stopped at. The other was Sherwood, a young man; and his wife, they said, was young and very beautiful."

"Great Heaven!"

Hugh had turned as pale as death, and sank upon his chair.

"Did you know them?" asked all, in a startled tone.

"I am quite sure they are the same," he said, after some time of agitated silence. "Poor Myrtle, I believe I named thee aright! I believe I gave thee thy mother's name!"

"What does the lieutenant think has become of the female captives? Has no attempt been made to rescue them?"

"Many searches have been organized. An Indian has been arrested who declares that they were murdered when it was found impossible to get them safely away."

"Circumstances seem to corroborate his account. There is no doubt that the awful story is true."

"Poor orphan! Henceforth thou art doubly my own," said Hugh, as he took the child in his arms. He was evidently so stricken with deep anguish that the young ladies dared not offer their sympathy, but retired almost in silence.

How much Mr. Fielding suffered that night will be known only to himself and Heaven. The next day he went to

Wakwaka and sought out the officer who had communicated the story to Miss Greggs. The substance of the story was corroborated by him; but he said he doubted if the name of the younger couple was Sherwood. He had been told since that it was Smith.

But there was something in Myrtle's eyes which convinced him that she was the child of the Myrtle whom once he had thought to call his own. Her falsehood was forgotten now—only her fearful and untimely fate was thought of.

To make assurance doubly sure, he wrote back to the East to her friends to inquire if she and her husband had emigrated to the West, and learned, in a mournful letter from a relative, that they had started for that very city of Wakwaka, and had not been heard from since.

Mr. Fielding did not tell them that he had a child supposed to be the daughter of Myrtle. As the father and mother of the young wife were neither of them living, he thought he had as good a claim to her as any one now left; and he felt that he could not resign her, at least for the present. Besides, he had the benefit of a doubt as to whether they had really any claims to this mysterious Child of the Prairie.

CHAPTER IV

MYRTLE FIELDING'S EDUCATION.

WINTER came for the first time upon the city of *Wakwaka*. The lake was frozen; the little steamer was safe at her moorings, laid up for the season; the everlasting sound of the putting up of houses was almost at an end; the communication with other parts of the world was cut off, save by wagon conveyance; the daily mail became a weekly one; and the citizens and speculators ceased to talk about wild land and city improvements, and turned to considering the prospect of a railroad which should connect them with the East, and be feasible all the year round.

Railroad speculations could not engross their minds entirely and in their leisure hours they were ready for any kind of gayety which could be improvised. The young girls talked about the fort and the officers through the day, and dressed for frolics in the evening. They had sleigh-rides and surprise-parties, and weddings were not entirely wanting. Every week they had a ball at the new brick hotel, the *Wakwaka House*. The most aristocratic attended these dances (of course they had an aristocracy, though it was not as yet clearly defined and decidedly fenced off with the sharp palings of ceremony), receiving attention from all respectable persons present; while a general spirit of freshness and vivacity prevailed, which made all deficiencies sources of merriment, and diffused more real pleasure than all the balls that Mrs. Potiphar ever gave.

If the girls showed too decided a partiality for officers' uniforms, the young city beaux bore it with commendable indifference, and took their harmless revenges all in good time.

Mr. Fielding was *the* gentleman *par excellence*, however: first, he was handsome; second, he was rich; third, he was reserved; fourth, melancholy; fifth, mysterious; sixth, he was

not a marrying man—six good reasons why he should be sought after. He was not perfect, although the ladies called him so, and therefore he must be excused for the small portion of his sex's vanity which he inherited, which made him not insensible to the curiosity he piqued and the favorable impressions he made. This consciousness upon the part of the men is very detestable, and exists usually with no good grounds to found it upon; but in his case there was much to command attention, and he really received it with dignity and nourished his self-complacency but very little upon it.

He could not have been called a gloomy man; and perhaps even the melancholy the ladies invested him with was half in their imaginations; though certainly during the first of the season there was the pallor of suppressed sorrow upon his brow. But his nature was a mingling of sunny geniality with a deep reserve; the warmth breaking out when subjects of common interest, such as music, beauty, or art, were being discussed, and the reserve following upon any reference to himself personally.

The life he now lived suited him well. He had the advantages of solitude and society both. When in town, he was petted and made a favorite; when out in his own little cabin, he was away from the world of action as completely as if buried in the cell of a hermit. He would have pined for those things which make a city endurable to a gifted mind—rich music, glorious pictures, works of art and luxury; but, for the present, nature was all those and more to a mind satiated with too much living. And then the novelty of playing father to a little girl! It was a very pleasant family circle, that of his home. Mrs. Muggins was as tidy as she was talkative; though he had a way of checking an excess of the latter virtue when it became wearisome. She kept little Myrtle as neat and beautiful as a lily, so that the fastidious bachelor could call her to his knee without fear of offence from soiled face or soiled garments. The child was more than the amusement of his idle hours. He took almost a mother's interest in the unfolding of the pure flower of her soul, the new developments of her mind, and the rapid expansion of her physical powers. And, while he delighted to teach her, she also taught him—many lessons of guileless faith, and the simplicity

of innocence, and the loveliness of nature as God made it in its freshness.

So, with books and his flute, hunting, and his visits to town, the winter passed by. He stood up as groomsman at the wedding of pretty Minnie Greggs with the young lieutenant. Miss Bluebird avowed that he seemed preyed upon by secret grief during the evening; but no one else felt assured of it; and she could not win him to unbosom his concealed unhappiness—which, “like a worm in the bud,” fed on his heart—to her sympathy. So, out of revenge, she shortly after married a dry-goods merchant, who, at this present writing, is spoken of as one of the founders of Wakwaka, and who has retired to a residence upon the banks of the lake, adjoining Mr. Fielding’s three hundred acres, and who can count himself worth two hundred thousand in Wakwaka railroad stock, and one hundred thousand in town lots, besides his pretty villa and grounds where he resides.

The spring came, and other summers and winters passed, and still Hugh Fielding lived in his cabin, hunted, fished, read, dreamed, philosophized, and seemed to change in nothing, for the years sat lightly upon him. He was content to be a kind of wonder to his neighbors, and to do as he pleased. The city grew and thrived apace; and, as the banks of the lake became thronged with beautiful residences, many a glittering lure was held out to induce him to part with his precious bit of land. But he was not to be tempted. Not an acre would he part with. “Selfish,” said some. “Holding on for an enormous price,” said others. “No eye for beauty—no taste. Allowing such an Eden to run wild! I wish I had it,” said many a wealthy person of cultivated ideas, who coveted his possessions.

Despite of all he had his own way about it. He did not even “improve” the scenery, except here and there to plant a tree or thin one out, to have decaying timber taken off, and some beautiful level stretches kept clear for the strawberries and wild-roses, and the waterbrush cleared from a grove of elms and maples which inclined down to the water’s edge at one picturesque point.

There was only another room added to his cabin, which was made necessary by the accumulation of books, pictures,

and the like, which he often sent East for. This new room, out of respect for Myrtle, was prettily carpeted, and had a little rocking-chair, and flower-stand, and some other handsome things in it. In the mean time, while the city was growing large, and Mrs. Muggins growing old, and every thing advancing or retarding, of course little Myrtle did not stand still. A will-o'-the-wisp or a butterfly would have stood still sooner than she. She grew in size, in health, and in beauty. The nature which threatened at first too great a degree of sensitiveness and fear, hardened and grew fearless in the fresh air and unrestrained life of her country home. In the warm weather, she, like her "papa," almost lived out-of-doors. She would ramble hours by his side, and then curl down and sleep with her head on his knee, while he read or dreamed beneath the shade of a tree or down by the water's edge on a cool shadowed rock. He taught her the name and character of all the flowers of the field and trees of the forest, so that at six years of age she was a miniature botany, bound, as it were, in rose leaves. He taught her, too, of the rocks, and sands, and waters, so that, as her mind grew, every thing, however humble, had an interest to her, and the earth was a great "curiosity-shop," much more strange and delightful, more absorbing to her fancy than the gaudy shops of the towns in which children are taught what to covet and admire.

One favorite place she had for spending her time when Hugh was away: a kind of fairy bower, made by an elm whose branches upon one side held up a beautiful wild flowering vine, while upon the other was a rose-bush always in blossom through the long summer. The open front looked upon the lake, and a moss-covered stone made a cushioned seat fit for a queen. The grass about it was clean, fine, and short, and full of violets.

She never went to school; but was sometimes taken to town to visit with other children, and had, in return, youthful guests come to see her in the pleasant weather.

But she was educated, even in book education. Hugh patiently taught her her alphabet and to read. After that it was only necessary for her to know that he desired her to study any book he put into her hands, and her love gave the impulse which made acquirement easy.

Thus time glided on for nine years. Nine years!—a long time; and Mrs. Muggins was growing older and feebler all this time; and one day she was taken sick, and soon she died. Myrtle grieved herself ill, and Mr. Fielding did not disdain to drop a tear upon her humble grave, for she had been a faithful servant and very kind to his darling little girl.

He was obliged to be his own housekeeper for some time, for another Mrs. Muggins was not easily to be found. When she saw him fussing about in a man's awkward way, little Myrtle's womanly instincts were aroused, and she put away her at first overwhelming grief to try and aid him. He would not have believed those slender little hands could do so much. She could lay the cloth, and sweep, dust, and brush; toast bread, and pour out tea; and his room she took pride in keeping in exquisite order.

He loved to watch her flitting about like a fairy put to earthly tasks, her feet moving as if to some inward music, and her golden hair encircling her in a halo of mystic brightness. The careful gravity, the pretty air of business newly put on, were bewitching to him.

"Well, Myrtle, I think I had better not get anybody to help us: you make such a nice little maid," he would say.

"I like to help you very much, papa; but what will you do when it comes washing, ironing, and churning days?"

"Sure enough. We are not equal to all emergencies, are we, daughter?"

So, in course of time, a woman was found to take the place of the departed. She was not of as quiet and nice a mold as the beloved and respected Mrs. Muggins. Mr. Fielding did not like her to preside at his table; and so little lady Myrtle never gave up her place at the head of the tea-things.

Affairs did not go on as systematically as of old. Many little nice tasks fell to the child which Mrs. Muggins used to perform; but, happily, she liked them.

Mr. Fielding dreaded a change. He had become so accustomed to the pleasant routine of his monotonous life that he disliked the thought of its being in any manner disturbed. **But a change came.**

CHAPTER V.

MRS. JONES'S NEPHEW.

MR. FIELDING received word which made it absolutely indispensable that he should go East and attend to his long-neglected interests there. What to do with Myrtle he did not know. He could not take her with him, for he had never hinted to his friends of his adoption of the little girl; and, besides, he had so much to do and so many places to visit. He dreaded the effect of the separation upon her, for he was her only friend; and he knew that she would feel very desolate without him. He could have her boarded, of course; but he did not wish to trust her in any common hands, for he expected to be away a year. Finally, he concluded to ask the child's advice.

"Oh, papa, take me with you! take me with you!" was at first her passionate cry; but, when she found that that could not very well be, she said: "Why not put me in the seminary, papa, where all the little girls in Wakwaka are sent? I shall be so unhappy, I know; but my studies will be some comfort; and I should like to learn music, so as to play for you when you come back."

Hugh had an abhorrence of boarding-schools. He believed that many young ladies learned more lessons in dissimulation, extravagance, envy, affectation, and exaggerated sentiment, than they did in any thing useful. He knew the principal of the Wakwaka school, however, and liked her well as a woman of character and high moral purposes. He trusted greatly, too, to Myrtle's intense love of nature, and to the influence of her early years, to defend her from the frivolities he so dreaded.

In a few weeks, his arrangements were all completed; and one spring morning he left his little Myrtle, weeping inconsolably in the arms of Mrs. Dennison, her new protector.

"She must have all that is necessary to enable her to ap

pear as well as the rest of your pupils: there will be no trouble about the bills, Mrs. Dennison. And every accomplishment for which she seems to have a liking she must have the means of acquiring. If she has any peculiar taste or talents, let them develop under your judicious care, and I shall be fully satisfied with what you do for her. Love her, if you can; and I know you will, for she is a tender flower, and will wither if left too solitary."

Mr. Fielding's voice trembled a little as he uttered the last sentence; and he kissed poor Myrtle hastily, for fear the lady would see the tear upon his cheek. The next instant he was gone; and Myrtle was left to begin her new course of life.

It was many days before there was much color in her cheek, or light in her eye; and her kind guardian did not put her immediately into the school routine.

Like one of nature's fairest flowers, her spirit expanded in the sunlight of affection; and, as she was sweet, unoffending, beautiful, and the probable heiress of the rich Mr. Fielding, every attention was showered upon her, until the smiles were won back to her dark, luminous eyes, and the roses to her cheeks.

The wonderful amount of unexpected knowledge possessed by her new pupil astonished Mrs. Dennison, while her ignorance of some of the "first branches" was equally surprising and amusing. Geography and grammar were unknown to her, while she could talk in Latin and French, quote page after page of classic poetry with beautiful emphasis, and tell more about botany, ornithology, and geology, than the most advanced scholar of the school. Besides this she had many quaint and philosophical ideas which made her appear surprisingly precocious, but which were simply the result of her having been made the sole companion and friend of a man of polished education and gifted mind. Her teacher went to work to "systematize" her requirements, and instruct her in things practical in the society about her.

A year seemed a great while to Myrtle. The confinement to rules of one who had lived so free a life was, at times, rather burdensome; and she welcomed the long vacation with excessive delight for the liberty it gave her, but mostly because her father was to come back to her. He came, bringing her

many beautiful presents, which, at first, she was too happy to regard. They went out and spent two or three weeks at the cabin, in the old way, cooking their own meals, and rambling about the country most of the time.

Myrtle's joy was sadly discomfited by learning that Mr. Fielding had escaped from the East only long enough to make her a visit, and that he was going back for a long, long time, as soon as her school opened. It made every moment she spent with him still dearer. It sounded like a bell tolling at a funeral when she was summoned back to her studies.

Events shaped themselves so unexpectedly with Mr. Fielding, a journey to France being among them, and a long stay in that country to settle an estate coming to him from his mother, that he did not return to Wakwaka, after the first visit, for four years.

In those four years Myrtle Fielding had grown into maidenhood—she was little Myrtle no longer. The most lovely and beloved of the pupils at the seminary, distinguished for grace of manner and purity of soul, the pride of her guardian upon all occasions of public display, and the beauty of the school, she still pined, in loneliness of heart, for some one *to belong to*, some one who would call her daughter, and receive the lavish affection of her heart, which now continually wasted itself in the sands of vain regret. Such passionate, tear-bedewed letters as she addressed to her adopted father would certainly have called him to her side, had it been in his power to leave the interests which bound him where he was.

It was a very dangerous state for a young lady's heart to be in, this craving after love and confidence. Such stores of affection, lying ready to be given away, would be very apt to find somebody to ask for them; and, if their proper owner did not appear in due time, some interloper might receive what had been accumulating for his benefit. Of this danger, Myrtle herself was most profoundly ignorant; and Mrs. Dennison, wise and experienced as she was, had never given it a thought. Mrs. Dennison's young ladies were supposed to be beyond the reach of human weakness.

Ah, Hugh Fielding! Hugh Fielding! where art thou while this fair child of thy affections is blushing and blooming into her sixteenth summer? Hast thou no presentiments?

One Saturday in May, Myrtle had permission to go out to "her home," as she still called Mr. Fielding's place. A man and his wife had been put in the cabin to keep things in order; and, whenever the young mistress chose to go out and spend her holiday rambling through her old haunts, she was sure of a good dinner and a warm welcome from them.

It was a delightful day, and, as she passed along, her guitar in her hand, her heart exulted in youthful fullness of life. A young lady with a guitar is always romantic, as maidens of thirty-five who bend gracefully over the blue-ribbened instruments in their boudoirs are certain to know—and *our* young lady was none the less romantic for being totally unaware of it. She, happy and beautiful, thought nothing of effect, but strolled along, enjoying the freedom from school, and thinking of that long looked-for, long hoped-for father whom she was now expecting home in a very few weeks. Then she was to leave school, and they were to live together, and be happy, as of old.

Thinking of all this, Myrtle could hardly wait until she got beyond the elegant residences which stretched for a mile along Lake street, before her gayety burst forth in singing; and she went caroling along the beautiful road, rivaling the birds who warbled in every tree.

Arriving at her destination, she just stepped in the house to give the woman "the news," and invite herself to dinner, and then fluttered out into the sunshine again, to spend the day, like the butterflies and flowers, in aimless pleasure.

All unambitious to please a more critical audience, she finally rested herself in a little bower which commanded her favorite view of the lake, and began tuning her guitar for the birds overhead. For a while her fingers tinkled over the strings in wandering chords of melody; and then she began to sing. Fresh and pure as her own young soul, silvery as the waters at her feet, harmonious as the air she breathed, was her voice; and she sung now as she never could have done in parlors or at "exhibitions." All the sweetest music which she knew came to her without effort; it appeared to her as if the wild roses at her feet turned a little to listen, and the birds were not backward in trilling their approval.

The elm above her bent over her lovingly; her cheeks

flushed with the joy of her own singing; she made such a picture as young poets dream about but seldom realize.

Is it any wonder, then, that a certain youth, poet and artist both, who happened in that vicinity at this auspicious hour, should have felt as if he had intruded into Paradise, and held him breathless in tremulous pleasure and surprise?

It would seem that he had come forth double-armed against unsuspecting Nature, for a pencil and slip of foolscap stuck out of his coat-pocket, and a portfolio of drawing materials was in his hand; but all thoughts of using either were banished, and he leaned against the trunk of an oak, not very far away from the singer, scarcely knowing whether he really saw and heard, or whether his fancy had bewitched him into some ancient land of goddesses, or some unsubstantial Eden out of which he could nevermore find his way.

Ah! he had indeed blundered into an Eden out of which he should never, never more go forth with free footsteps. But he did not know it yet.

So the young girl sung and sung for his pleasure, as well as that of the birds, until she fairly wearied herself out. Her guitar slid down into the grass, and she flung back her hair, with an exclamation:

"Oh, dear! I'm hungry! I wonder if it is dinner-time?"

It was a very useful speech to make at that enticing period when the youth was just looking to see her fly away in a golden cloud—it convinced him that she was of the earth, earthy, and gave him intense satisfaction.

At that moment she detected him, and knew by his blush that he had been listening.

"The impudent fellow," she murmured—as if he were to blame.

Affecting not to see him, she gathered up her bonnet and guitar and retreated to the house.

"Waal," said Mrs. Jones, as she made her appearance, "your walk and the dumplings are done at the same time. Dinner is just ready: I'll ring the bell for the men, and we'll set down."

The men! Myrtle had never known of but one man about the premises, and, as there was no farming to be done, she could not conceive of the use for another. Sure enough, the

table was set for four. She asked no questions, but waited for the summons to dinner to gratify her curiosity in due time. Mr. Jones came in, presently, and shook hands with her according to his custom, "hoping to find her flourishin'."

"Where's John?" asked the wife, as they drew their chairs to the table.

"Comin'," said the husband, as he lifted the cover from a platter of fried trout.

"Comin'" he was, for at that minute he entered the door, doffing his straw hat with a graceful motion, and setting his camp-stool down in a corner.

"My nephew, John Jones, Miss Fieldin'."

Myrtle made her coldest, most queenly bow. Nevertheless, she detected the slightest hint of a mischievous twinkle about the eyes of her new acquaintance, which the polite gravity of the rest of his countenance belied.

He sat down to dinner.

"You've been a strolling round, too, hain't you, John?" asked Mrs. Jones, as she handed him his coffee. "Did you and Miss Fieldin' see each other when you was out? I reckoned you'd meet."

"I saw Miss Fielding," returned the young man, "but I can not say whether she saw me or not."

Myrtle made no reply, being occupied with her fish.

"You've both of you such a love for rambling about and takin' likenesses, you ought to be acquainted. Two artists, as you call yourselves, at my table, I s'pose I ought to feel proud."

There was just the slightest haughty motion to Myrtle's head, as good Mrs. Jones spoke of an acquaintanceship with her nephew, which proved a little innate aristocracy; but the young girl was sweetness itself, and could not be forbidding long at a time: so she smiled at the speaker, and kept her eyes carefully from the nephew. Mrs. Jones had not the least idea but that her handsome, wild, "smart," fearless young relative was "fit for a queen's" friendship; and neither was Myrtle quite sure but that he was.

"Proud of fiddlesticks?" said her husband, testily. "If John would quit his do-nothin' ways of trying to make an artist of himself, there would be somethin' to be proud of

I've e'en-a'most give up all hope. If he'd quit pencils and such little patterin' trash, and take to lawyerin' or farmin', he'd suit me better. Not that I mean to be harsh," he added, in a softer tone; "and not but makin' picters is pretty work for young gals."

Myrtle caught the young gentleman's eye, as old Mr. Jones concluded his speech, and laughed outright in her sweet, merry way.

"Do not make any apologies for being severe upon us," she said. "We know it's the fashion of the world to think there is common sense, as they call it, in nothing but in making money; so we do not expect sympathy."

"True!" responded the nephew, emphatically; and he and the beautiful girl opposite him began to feel more friendly.

"Waal, how are we to get along without money, I'd like to know?" asked Mr. Jones, senior, but in that gentle tone which he always used in speaking to Myrtle.

"Oh, don't ask me!" cried she; "I know nothing about it—I have never thought. I suppose papa furnishes me with what I want; and so I have not been obliged to ask."

"About as much as women usually know!" growled her questioner, with a laugh.

A general good-humor prevailed at the close of the meal, after which Mr. Jones took his nephew off to look at the cattle, which gave the aunt an opportunity of telling all about him—what a "likely" boy he was, and what great ideas he had got in his head, but how modest and good-humored he was, for all—that he was her favorite, and she'd asked him to come and stay with them as long as he liked—that he "writ verses," and "took profiles,"—and wouldn't Myrtle let him take hers for them,—they'd set great store by it, etc.; to all which Myrtle listened with keen interest, while her eyes kept wandering to the window looking for the return of the object of their talk. And when his bright face and black curls flashed past, her heart gave a little bound, she knew not wherefore.

To please the kind old woman she allowed him to sketch her in crayon, and then she had to sing some of her favorite melodies for old Mr. Jones, and then—Mr. Jones, Jr., asked

her to walk out, and show him some of the pretty bits of scenery in the neighborhood.

And, if John Jones could hardly appreciate the beauty of the spot, as pointed out to him by the excited young creature before him, for thinking of the clustering glory of her hair, the faultless loveliness of her features, and the expression of infantine innocence lighted with brilliancy of soul which rendered them doubly attractive, it must likewise be confessed that Myrtle caught herself at many a stolen glance at the face of the high-spirited, interesting boy.

The next Saturday, Myrtle went again to "her home," and every Saturday henceforth for weeks. This was always her custom in feasible weather; and Mrs. Dennison must not be blamed. Could she have dreamed that the people at the cabin had a nephew? or that her fastidious scholar could have been pleased with an unknown John Jones? or that the said John was an artist, and a very handsome, polite and fascinating boy?

A golden mist hung over Myrtle's studies, obscuring their meaning in a haze of splendor. Perhaps the reason of her great and startling happiness, her unwonted moods of reverie, her constantly thrilling anticipations, was that she was soon to see her father. This did indeed take up a large portion of her thoughts; and she looked forward to the meeting with the intensity of a four years' old anticipation.

One Saturday she was no longer left to doubt the full meaning of her late emotions. In the bower beneath the elm, in an unexpected moment of impassioned feeling, her boy-lover had sunk at her feet; and she had smiled upon his avowal.

She did not ask if he had position—if he had wealth—if her father would approve—if her lover was worthy of her—if she was doing her duty; for when did a younger girl, for the first time in love, pause to answer such questions?

Myrtle believed as fully in the truth and worthiness of her lover as she did in her own existence. She *knew* her father would approve; and, in the mean time, she waited for him in ardent expectation.

CHAPTER VI.

MR. FIELDING RETURNS HOME.

AGAIN Mr. Fielding stood upon the eminence from which he first looked down upon Wakwaka. Below him lay a city of twenty thousand inhabitants; and on either side were gardens gorgeous with cultivated flowers, tree-shadowed avenues, fine mansions, and a costly, fashionable church. Beyond was the prairie upon which he had picked up the stray waif which had since become the "light of his eyes," the delight of his existence—something to love, to plan for, to make happy. That prairie waved with wild-grass and unnamed blossoms no longer: it was checkered with fields of green corn and wheat just gilded with the June sun; and a railroad passed in a straight, shining line across its bosom. While he lingered and looked, the iron horse came shrieking and panting along it, in place of the majestic wild steeds which once swept in their night through the long and rustling grass.

Thoughts of the past and present stirred strangely tender emotions in Hugh's breast. He remembered the little creature he had held so closely to him as he rode over the hills; he remembered the tragic fate of her mother, that beautiful woman who, alone of all the women in the world, had bowed down his heart, and whose weakness or whose falseness had poisoned all of his existence for the last twenty years.

Thinking of all this, he hurried on, eager to greet his long-forsaken little Myrtle—for little she still seemed to him. He knew her better in memory than in present reality. He had left the coach on the hill, that he might have a better opportunity of observing the changes in the town. As he passed along the handsome street, he saw Mrs. Dennison's door-plate on a larger building than she occupied when he left, for her school had grown with the city. He rang, and was shown

into a receiving-room, where he sent his name to Mrs. Lemmison and his daughter.

He sat waiting in impatient joy, eager to see his child again, when the door opened, and she glided in. He arose to his feet instinctively, but the words he was to have spoken were unsaid.

It was all in vain that Myrtle had kept telling him in her letters how much she had grown, and that she was quite a young lady, and all that. To be sure, he had entertained a faint idea of her having put up some of her curls and lengthened her frocks a little, and that perhaps she would be a little awkward in her transition state from pretty embroidered pantalettes to dignified long dresses. But *this* Myrtle!—the word “daughter” died in his heart, and another word leaped up. It was as if the vision of his early manhood—that glorious vision which had invested life with such a brightness, only to vanish and leave it more dark and prosaic than before—again lived and breathed before him. Here was the same slender and rounded form, clad with health and an unconscious grace, the same brown hair falling in shadowy masses touched with gold, the same fair face, the same eyes beaming their luminous sweetness upon him.

“Myrtle!” he murmured.

She hesitated a moment, as if wondering why he did not open his arms to receive her, and then flew to him, and flung her arms about his neck.

“Father! *dear* father!” she sobbed, with a little burst of joyful tears; and then she kissed his cheeks a dozen times, and leaned her head on his shoulder, laughing and wiping away the sparkling drops from her eyes.

“*Father*, indeed!” thought Hugh to himself, as those soft lips showered their kisses upon him. “Thank Heaven, though, I am *not* your father!”

“Are you not glad to see your little girl?” asked Myrtle, suddenly, grieved at the silence with which he received her caresses. “Oh, papa, you have forgotten your Myrtle!”

He yearned to take her to his breast, and kiss her with the passionate love which was struggling in his heart; but he felt that it would not be a paternal kiss, and so he gave her none. He knew that her girlish timidity would shrink from so sud-

den an expression of feeling, could she be conscious of its nature, and its perceptions of truth were too delicate to permit him to deceive her. But oh, what a sweet hope had flowered into beauty in his soul! Hugh Fielding forgot that he was forty-eight years of age. He was as strong, as handsome, as full of life as ever, and he forgot that he was growing old. He did not ask himself if he was the ideal of a young girl's lover. The surprise was too sudden, too overpowering—he did not as yet even question his own emotions.

“No, Myrtle,” he said, “I have not forgotten you—scarcely for an instant. I have been as eager as you for this meeting. But I was so surprised to find you so tall, so beautiful, so much of a young lady.”

Myrtle blushed and laughed.

“Didn't I tell you, papa, that you would be astonished?”

At this moment Mrs. Dennison came in, having paused to arrange her ringlets and put on a new, coquettish little thread-lace cap, with lilies-of-the-valley drooping from its softness, and mingling with her still raven curls.

The beautiful and satisfactory appearance of her pupil had had the desired effect upon Mr. Fielding, for he greeted her with marked pleasure. His joy, his gratitude, tinged his manner with rosy warmth; and she being equally gratified, they were a happy trio.

“Would you think, Mrs. Dennison, papa was amazed to find me grown so tall?” cried the young girl. “He imagined I had stood still for the last four years.”

“I suppose he hardly realized that he would have a young lady on his hands, ready to be introduced into the world. Do not you think it a great responsibility, Mr. Fielding?” with a sweet smile.

“Why, yes! certainly; it presents itself to me in a new light,” was the rather hesitating reply.

“Oh, papa, I assure you I shall not be the least trouble,” laughed Myrtle. “I have never teased Mrs. Dennison very much, and I shall tease you still less.”

“Your daughter says truly that she was never much trouble to me. She seems more like a child than a pupil. It will be a severe struggle for me to give her up to you. I feel like a mother to her.”

"You have been very, very kind," murmured Myrtle, leaving her clasp of her father's hand to glide over and give her preceptress a kiss. "But we shall live so near that I can come to see you every week, and you can spend the vacations with us. Will not that be pleasant, papa?"

"Delightful!" he replied; for whatever pleased Myrtle, pleased him.

Myrtle had to resign her new-found treasure while he went to his hotel to rid himself of the dust of travel. But he returned, by invitation, to tea, and she had a happy evening. Once Mrs. Dennison sent her from the room for a while upon some excuse, for, as she told Mr. Fielding, she had an important matter to speak of, which her interest in the dear child prompted should be said.

"You know," she said, in this confidential communication, "that Myrtle is no longer a child. She has graduated with the first honors of my school, and must now take her place in *society*, Mr. Fielding. She requires a female friend and *chaperon*: some relative of yours, perhaps, you can invite to reside with you for that purpose. I *wish* that Myrtle had a mother; but, as that can not be, I think it well for you to think of what I have suggested; and more especially, as you are only her adopted father: to be sure you think of her as *fondly and tenderly*—"

"I do," interrupted her listener.

"As if she were your own child; yet the *world*—since we live in the world, Mr. Fielding, we must regard its dictates."

Hugh was really much obliged to the lady for what she had said and hinted. He confessed that, since he had seen Myrtle, some idea of this difficulty had dawned dimly upon his mind, but he had not yet had time to reflect upon it. If Mrs. Dennison would consent, he should leave her pupil with her a few weeks, until some arrangements could be made.

This plan pleased her very much. She would have an opportunity of impressing upon him deeply the necessity of a mother for Myrtle.

In the mean time, as the object of this discussion came gliding in her radiant beauty back into the room, Hugh smiled at his inward thought of how little Mrs. Dennison knew of his real purposes, of how little she suspected the case with

which he could take upon himself the office of protector. Thus do people oftentimes work at cross-purposes.

Myrtle sang and played, bewitching the heart of her bachelor guardian more and more; and when at last she kissed him good-night, and he went to his dreams, they wore more the roseate hue of twenty-two than forty-eight.

The next day, he began to display that energy which had not particularly marked his character since the mainspring of hope had been withdrawn. He took Mrs. Dennison and Myrtle out to his place to select a situation for the mansion which he had already partially contracted for. Of course, the elder lady was glad to have a voice in the matter which might hereafter be of importance to her; and she took it as a very favorable symptom that she was asked to make one of the party. Hugh was only acting upon her suggestions that he must have a *chaperon* for the young girl.

They alighted before the cabin door, where John Jones, the artist, came out and assisted the ladies to alight. Did Hugh mark the blush upon the cheeks of the young couple? Of course he did not. Never was there a man blinder to truth and fate than he.

After Mr. Fielding had exchanged greetings with the tenants of his house, and been introduced to their nephew, he invited the latter to accompany them, and they started out on their search.

The fine, artistic taste of the boy at once attracted Hugh's attention, and he learned that the young man was an artist by profession. It was John himself who, with becoming modesty, pointed out the spot which he would deem most desirable; and its admirable fitness striking all the rest of the party, helped to complete the good opinion Mr. Fielding had involuntarily formed of him.

"There is certainly a good deal of genius about that young fellow," he remarked to Myrtle, when John was busy talking about pictures with Mrs. Dennison. "He has a glorious eye—full of fire and frankness."

How the young girl's heart leaped up!—while she made not the least reply. Alas, Hugh flattered himself that that glowing cheek and drooping eye was an evidence of some gentle emotion for him!

Learning that the young artist had made architecture his study, Mr. Fielding gave him a commission to draw the plan for the proposed residence, giving him a summary of what he should like as to size, style, and expense. He was usually a man of piercing vision, and but few things escaped his keen apprehension; yet, all-absorbed as he was in his own dreams, he did not notice the expressive glance and stolen pressure of hands with which Myrtle and the young man parted. Mrs. Demmison, too, bewildered by gorgeous visions of a mansion over which *she* was to preside, the site for which she had just been selected, was deaf, and dumb, and blind to every thing but Mr. Fielding.

So the party drove back to town as contented with each other as when they started out.

Myrtle was impatient to get away from the seminary, as school-girls usually are. She did not know how to wait for the new house. If it would not have involved the necessity of driving John Jones away, she would have wished the cabin immediately vacated, that they might return to their old, romantic way of living. Mrs. Demmison was so continually with them that it seemed as if she should never get an opportunity of revealing to her father the weight that was on her heart—a confidence she did not fear so much to make, since she saw how he favored her lover. When she actually found herself walking out to the farm alone with Mr. Fielding, her heart began to palpitate frightfully with anticipation. She found that what she so longed to say was very hard to put into words, after all. So they passed onward, Hugh doing most of the talking, until they reached the bower. The sight of the spot where her lover had sank upon his knee at her feet impelled her to the trial.

"Dear father," she began, in a faltering voice, "I have wished so much for an opportunity—"

A long pause, while she stood picking a rose to pieces, the color suffusing cheeks and brow.

"Dear father—"

"*Never* call me father again!" cried Hugh, in a sudden burst of passionate energy.

She looked up amazed. His cheek was likewise flushed and his dark eyes were bent upon her with an expression which she could not understand.

"I can not endure it," he said, grasping her hand tightly. "Every time you have uttered that word since my return, it has almost distracted me. Can not you guess why, Myrtle?"

Her eyes fell under the glow of tender light which burned in his. She trembled with a sudden apprehension.

"It is because I love you with other than paternal love, darling Myrtle. Since the first moment of my return, I have felt how impossible it was for me to resist the torrent of passion which rushes through my heart. You are to me *my* Myrtle—the Myrtle of old, whom I once loved with the fervor of youth. It is true that your mother—for I feel that she was your mother—was false; but, in *your* heart, Myrtle, there is nothing but truth. You have not learned the ways of the world. You are my boyhood's dream. Will you marry me?"

Poor child! how she trembled! He thought it was all with maiden timidity, and put his arm around her and drew her to his side. She leaned her head upon his shoulder, sobbing: "You are my father, Mr. Fielding. Oh, still remain so, or you will break my heart!"

"Father!" again he exclaimed, in a voice of such concentrated feeling that she involuntarily looked up into his pale face.

"I tell you I *will not* hear it. Wife is a much dearer term than daughter, Myrtle"—how tenderly he spoke the word wife!—"and, if you can not be that, I must go away again—back to the loveless life I led before I found you, a little sleeping, helpless child, upon the prairie."

With a great, high-hearted struggle of duty and gratitude over youthful love, Myrtle flung her arms, in the old childish way, about his neck.

"You shall not do that, *fa*—Hugh; I will be whatever you wish. I will be your wife, Mr. Fielding."

CHAPTER VII.

THE PLOT.

MR. FIELDING was reclining at his leisure up in a knoll beneath a tree, half-hidden by the long grass which rustled around him. A volume of "Shakspeare," open at the "Midsummer Night's Dream," had nearly dropped from his hand; for he had forgotten all about the fairies and the lovers of the play in musing upon his own happiness. The clink of workmen's hammers, as they carved and polished the stone for his new house, smote upon his ears pleasantly; for, as the hum of the bee tells of summer and summer sweets, the soft tumult of the distant work told of a home and a wife.

The first thing which roused him from his reverie was the sound of approaching voices, conversing in low but earnest tones. Looking up, he saw his Myrtle and the young artist slowly walking, arm in arm, to and fro, on the level stretch just beneath him. At first, he could distinguish no words, and, indeed, he did not wish nor intend to, though his curiosity was excited by the absorbing interest with which they appeared to listen and reply. At last, they paused quite near him, and, throwing their arms about each other, sobbed like two little children.

"A pretty scene! behold it, ye heavens and earth!" muttered Hugh, between his compressed lips, his vest-buttons ready to burst with his suppressed anger. "Is there *no* truth in woman?"

After yielding to their passionate grief for a time, Myrtle stood back, and folded her hands tightly together. He could see her beautiful face bathed in tears.

"Go, John," she said, in that voice of forced calmness which tells most plainly of despair. "I must never see you again. You will not blame me, ever, in your thought, I know. You will not call me false. I *should* be false to every impulse of

gratitude and duty did I consult *our* happiness before that of my friend, my benefactor, my more than father. You know all that he has done for me—all the claims he has upon me. I should rather we should both be miserable all our lives than to be the one to inflict pain upon him. You do not ask it, do you, John?"

"No, no, I do not. His claims are superior to mine. But ~~th~~, Myrtle, it is killing me."

"*Don't* say that, John. You will be happy some time, if only to reward you for your noble sacrifice now: I *know* you will. Heaven will bless you. Good-by."

Her companion gazed at her as if he could not tear himself away.

"Go, go, dear John. Good-by."

"O God! Myrtle. Good-by."

He turned from her with a listless, weary step, and went away, leaving her leaning against a young maple-tree, looking after him with blinded eyes.

Hugh had heard and seen it all. Slowly his anger had melted away, as he heard this youthful pair bravely renouncing what was their evident happiness for *him*. For the first time, his own selfishness appeared to him. What right had he to require the love and duty of that young heart which had turned so much more naturally to a more fitting mate? Yes, he had to acknowledge, proud and conscious of his rare acquirements as he was, that John Jones, with his boyish beauty and enthusiasm and fresh feeling, was a more suitable companion than he for the fair girl who had chosen him. Yet he had not meant to be selfish. He loved Myrtle too well for that. Ah, it was always his fate to play the martyr—to see the untasted cup snatched away, to know no fruition of his hopes. He was too much of a hero to shrink from the crisis. He could not blight the happiness of two young souls for a few years of bliss for himself. He would emulate the generosity which he had just seen. He wanted to rise and call the boy to return and receive from his hands the most precious gift which he had to bestow. But when he attempted to call, he found his throat so parched that no sound would come from it. The disappointment was too terrible—it had come upon him too suddenly.

The clink of workmen's hammers still smote upon his ears, but now the sound was full of pain; he felt as if he must put a stop to it; he wished a paralysis to seize upon that noble building, smiting it, as it stood—fixing it forever, unfinished and desolate—that it might never fulfil its destiny as a home of warmth, and luxury, and comfort, the shelter of loving hearts, the birth-place of happy children. Unfinished, and going to decay, the unfulfilled promise of a home, showing its wealth of rooms and splendor of proportions, only to make its ruin the more conspicuous—would it not be like his life, thus unsatisfactory, thus cheated of its development? A bitterness more bitter than that of his first disappointment welled up in his soul. From under the shadow of the hand upon which his forehead was drooped, he watched in silence, until the young girl had wept herself quiet and walked away in the direction of the town. Then he arose and sauntered listlessly toward the new mansion. Young Jones was overseeing the work as usual. Perceiving Mr. Fielding, he approached him.

“I have sudden and very important reasons for resigning the charge of your work,” he began, in a low but firm voice.

“How, now?” interrupted Hugh, angrily.

“I do not think I shall put you to any inconvenience by doing so,” continued the young man; “the plans are so minutely finished, and the work so far progressed, that it can be finished without trouble. Besides, I have consulted an architect of Wakwaka, who promises to take my place—”

“Take your place—no one can take your place, John Jones!” Now this might be intended as a compliment; if it was, it was thundered forth in a strangely savage tone.

“I assure you I shall not release you, sir; you must fulfil your engagement with me, or forfeit the whole.”

Mr. Fielding was usually so courteous and considerate in all his dealings, that John looked up amazed; there was a dark look upon his countenance which he had never before observed.

“Ah!” thought he, sadly, “can it be possible he is so unjust that he has such a temper? if this is the case, poor Myrtle, I pity you.”

“Yes, sir! you must conclude this work according to agreement. From not one article of the contract will I absolve you.”

Poor Hugh! his companion little guessed what a tempest warred within him; and that he was only putting on a little outside fierceness to cover a purpose the most unselfish and pure. The only consolation he had in his solitude of heart, was the playing of a pretty farce, by which he kept two young people miserable for the time being, with the expectation of surprising them with a double and overwhelming happiness by and-by. Not one hint did he give of the knowledge he possessed, but exacted of the young architect the fulfilment of his contract, thus keeping him in the vicinity so fraught, to him, with dangerous dreams and mocking desires. Almost every day, as the summer sped by, he would pierce the heroic breast of the youth with some such shaft as the following:

"Hurry up the workmen, John, my boy. Don't you know the wedding is set for the 10th of September? We must have wedding and house-warming at the same time."

Or this:—

"You are doing so nicely, John, you shall come to the wedding to pay for this. You shall dance with the bride."

As often as twice a week his handsome open barouche would drive up into the new grounds; the spirited bay horses would be checked with a gay flourish, and the owner of the establishment would hand out its future mistress to spend a half-hour in inspecting the progress made on the mansion, and giving his opinion as to this improvement and that, and would it suit her taste to have things thus and so, as if he feasted upon their secret misery. Mr. Fielding seemed to make opportunities for throwing the young pair into each other's society. Their tastes were mutually consulted, and they were left to decide matters of minor importance to themselves. It was cruel of the arch plotter—he knew it was, yet he justified himself with glowing pictures of a future surprise in which all this wretchedness should be blotted out in sudden splendor, and he only be the suffering party—a sufferer whom no one should know was wretched. It would have been hard enough for the young couple to forget each other if they had separated at once and forever, as they had resolved to do. He made the self-imposed task, one which human nature rebelled against, yet he took a strange pride in perceiving the noble principle of both—how well they guarded their looks and

actions--how calm their voices, how innocent their greetings, and farewells.

Myrtle was acting according to the promptings of gratitude and duty; and she did not intend to humiliate her sacrifice by any thought or deed which should wrong the man she had promised to marry. She meekly obeyed his suggestions as to the preparations for the approaching marriage.

"Have you plenty of money to buy pretty things, Myrtle?"

"I suppose so, Mr. Fielding. My purse is always supplied. No matter how much I waste, the next time I open it, it is full."

"A comfortable purse, indeed. But really, my dear, you are not extravagant. Have you ordered the wedding-dress?"

"Mrs. Dennison has, I believe. I trusted it to her."

"I hope it will be a pretty one. Don't fail to have it pretty, Myrtle. Do you know I am particular about ladies' dress? I like to see youthful and pretty creatures looking like roses and lilies."

"Mrs. Dennison will see that it is all it should be--she has the same taste, I believe."

"And are you indifferent? Young girls usually go half-crazy over the delight and excitement of the bridal *trousseau*."

"Why, no, Mr. Fielding, I hope I am not indifferent. I should like to look to please you."

How wearily the young head drooped against his shoulder! He looked earnestly into her face. She was so beautiful--he loved her so much--almost was he tempted to renounce his vowed self-denial, to accept the expected sacrifice. He *could* not give her up--he *would* not! She was his; she looked upon herself as his wife; was it not more than man could do, to put her into the arms of another? The arm he had laid about her waist drew her so tightly that she sighed with the pain. It was the first time he had bestowed one caress upon her for weeks, except a quiet kiss upon the cheek at meeting and parting. She did not know it, but there "were farewells in a kiss"--a farewell to all such future joy, in that one passionate embrace.

"This is the fifth of September," said he, seating her by his side, and studying her drooped face; "in five days, Myrtle. It is time the wedding-dress was made."

"It is made, and it is beautiful enough to please you, be you as fastidious as you may: white silk, rich and shining, covered with costly, delicate lace; flowers on the bosom; a wreath for my hair, and a veil of the most exquisite design. Mrs. Dennison sent to New York for them. Mrs. Dennison takes great interest in these things; but she does not seem in as good spirits lately. She says I am to be envied."

She seemed to be talking to keep thought away, and to prevent him saying those tender things which girls generally love to hear. He looked at her closely while she chattered away; her cheek was surely growing thinner, though suffused with the bloom of excitement; there was a sadness, as of unshed tears, in the faltering eyes—yet she smiled, such tremulous, lovely smiles, and tried hard to seem gay and glad. He worshiped her all the more, as he saw the depths of her character thus proved by circumstance. Those gentle smiles touched him to renew more firmly his vow to secure her happiness, and let his own take care of itself.

"It is only five days more," he murmured. "Let me keep you till then; let me call you mine until then. Five days will not rob you of many dimples which the future will not restore to your cheeks."

"What did you say, Mr. Fielding?"

"I was 'talking in my sleep'—no matter what I said. Mrs. Dennison has been low-spirited, has she? Well, I have a present for her. Ask her to accept it from me as a trilling return for her kindness to you. She must wear them to the wedding."

He showed her a velvet-lined box, containing a superb set of jewels—brooch and ear-rings—a large diamond in each, set about with small emeralds.

"And here is my gift to you; you must wear it with the veil and wreath," and he placed in her hand a necklace of pearls.

"You are too good to me—far too good to me," murmured Myrtle, tremulously, hardly looking at the beautiful ornament. She felt as if she had wronged this generous man by ever having had a thought of another, no matter how conscientiously she now strove to forget that other.

"Come, Myrtle, you look regretful. Do you not like the

pearls? Never mind; we will change them, then. Play for me, now. I have not heard you sing for a fortnight."

He led her to the piano.

"What shall I sing? have you any choice?"

"Here is something that reads prettily; I do not think I have heard the music. Try it, and I will tell you if it pleases me."

So she began, in a trembling voice, which gradually steadied itself:

"LIDA, lady of the land,
Hath a crowd of gallant suitors;
Squires who fly at her command;
Knights her slightest motion wait;
She hath barons kneeling mute,
To hear the fortune of her proffers
All—except the honest suit
JOHNNY GORDON humbly offers.

"LIDA, lady of the land,
Keep your wondrous charms untroubled,
May your wide domain expand,
May your gems and gold be doubled!
Keep your lords on beaded knee!
Take all earth, and leave us lonely,
All—except you take from me
Humble JOHNNY GORDON only!"

Whether it were the name of Johnny alone, or whether it were the miserable fact that *she* had lost her humble lover, or what it was that overcome poor Myrtle so, hardly had she finished the exulting note of the more fortunate maiden in the song, than she burst into tears, and hastily fled from the room.

"Poor child! she is getting nervous," murmured Mrs. Dennison, who had come into the parlor during the singing; "don't you think she is *rather* young to marry, Mr. Fielding? especially a person so much—so much—"

"More fitted to be her father, my dear lady. Well, perhaps so—but it is rather late to be making such reflections. May I trouble you to take charge of this necklace, which she has forgotten? And here is a trifle which I trust you will honor me by wearing to the wedding."

The lady accepted the gift with thanks, and Hugh bowed himself out into the darkness, and walked five miles by starlight, before he could compose himself.

CHAPTER VIII.

MYRTLE'S MOTHER.

THAT mysterious plot by which Hugh Fielding wished to immolate himself at the moment when he raised others to the pinnacle of happiness, was to allow the preparations for the wedding to go on, as if he were to be the bridegroom, and at the last moment, when the company was assembled, to refuse to take that important part upon himself, but allot it to John Jones, Jr., while he sank into the second place as groomsman.

But "the best laid plans will oft go wrong," as this one threatened to now, very much to his chagrin. John Jones was not to be heard from. The day and hour that his part of the contract had been finished, he had vanished from the vicinity. He was not the person to stay and lament over his misfortunes, working himself up into frenzy by watching the happiness of another, which he coveted for himself.

He had disappeared, and to an artfully-put question, Myrtle returned such an answer, that Hugh found she was ignorant of his whereabouts. So were the uncle and the aunt. Here was a pretty kettle of fish for a man who had laboriously concocted quite a different dish. Hugh did not know, after all, but he should be under the necessity of marrying Myrtle himself, or delaying the wedding, which would be almost as bad, seeing everybody was invited, the cake baked, the dress completed, the minister engaged, and the new house put in order.

"Dear suz!" said Mrs. Jones, when he went to her cabin, to inquire about her nephew. "I hain't the least idee where the boy is. He's been gone a week now, and it wouldn't surprise me a bit if he was 'way back to York. He's seemed homesick and discontented, lately. He was always independent, John was—goin' and comin' and doin' as he pleased. Not that he ever pleased to do any thing bad, for he didn't; there never was a better nor a smarter boy, that had had no more

opportunities, if I do say it, as am his aunt. He's never had a mother, poor boy, since he was five year old. And you come to invite him to the weddin'? it's mighty polite of you, sir; and I'm sorry he's gone off, for I know he'd have liked to go first-rate. He's always taken a shine to Miss Myrtle, and he'd like to be to her wedding, I know."

"I don't doubt *that*!" ejaculated her visitor; "and it's mighty important he should be there. In fact, Mrs. Jones, I'm afraid Miss Myrtle will feel as if she couldn't get married without he were present."

"You don't say so! well, it's very kind of her, to be sure; and I'm dreadful sorry he's given us the slip so. I've been over to the new house, seein' to things. The carpets is all down now and the rooms well-aired; the kitchening is furnished ready for cookin', and black Dinah is there seein' to the vittals. She'll have two more out to help her the day of the weddin', besides the waiters, and I've seen to the rooms up-stairs. Every thing is looking beautiful; the new furniture is sot in the chambers. If the fixin's for the parlors and the liberray come to-morrow, every thing will be ready in time. I wonder what made John clear out just now. He hain't eat nuthin' for a month, and seemed to be powerful quiet, but they say folks as write and make pictures is subject to such turns, and I didn't mind it in particular."

"And you don't know where a note would reach him, if I should try to send him one?"

"No, I don't. He may be in York State, and he may be in Mississippi. 'Twouldn't do no harm to write to Clarkville, New York, but he couldn't get it in time to come to the weddin'. Maybe he'll be back as suddingly as he went off."

"Well, if he don't, I'm afraid he'll have cause to repent it," muttered the gentleman to himself, adding aloud: "I shall look for you and Mr. Jones, at all events; don't disappoint me."

"La! I may look in out of the kitchening, where I'm helping Dinah, just when the ceremony's goin' on," responded Mrs. Jones, with a courtesy.

"No, but I wish you to come dressed in your best, and be my guests, Mrs. Jones. This is an occasion when one wishes to see all their friends rejoicing with him--and who are more truly my friends than you and your husband."

"Indeed, and I do not believe any one is, so far as that goes," replied she, looking at him with respect and admiration. "I'd have liked, right well, to have given Miss Myrtle suthin' handsome as a present; but poor folks like as has nothin' to give that would be acceptable, so I've baked the bride-cake, and a beauty it is! There's a ring in it, too—a real gold ring—which John give me to put in; and whoever gets it will be married next, they say."

"Good-day, Mrs. Jones, and if you hear from your nephew, let me know."

"I will, immejetly, Mr. Fieldin'."

It was too bad to ruin such a striking and romantic *dénouement*, as Hugh had consoled himself with contriving. He was walking to and fro across the lawn in front of the new house, thinking of it. It wanted but two days to that set forth in the invitations; whether to recall those, with notes worded, "deferred till further notice," or whether to allow affairs to proceed and wind up, as everybody, save himself, expected, were the two horns of this dilemma.

"That provoking young rascal! he deserves to lose all he might have gained," he muttered, kicking a wild-rose in the face, who was listening with innocent curiosity to his soliloquies.

"What are you treating that pretty flower so rudely for?" asked an arch voice at his elbow; he turned, growing red in the face, at being caught in such an ungentlemanly act.

"Why, Myrtle! what's brought you over here? I haven't been able to get you near this place for a fortnight. You seem to be growing shy of your future home."

"It seems so strange to think I am to live here so soon with you—your wife—that I *am* almost afraid of it. But Mrs. Dennison had occasion to consult the housekeeper about the arrangements, and she insisted upon my coming along. She is in the house now, deep in consultation with Aunt Dinah; she sent me to pay my respects to you."

"I am very much obliged to Mrs. Dennison. Will you take my arm for a stroll, litt'e bird?"

How she started at the word! how pale she grew, and hardly with happiness, though she strove to force a smile! The little trembling hand sought his arm, and she walked by

his side, silent, pale, abstracted. He pitied her. He saw the effort she was making to appear to be happy. He wished the farce were over. When he had reinstated her in her birth right of joy and love—when he had crowned his queen with the fullness of content—had beheld her supremely blessed, exquisitely grateful and joyous—he would be ready to retire to the melancholy shades of perpetual old bachelorhood. They came, in the course of their walk, to the same old oak-tree, under whose shadow Hugh had sat, when he saw and heard the passionate parting of the two lovers. It was evident to him that Myrtle recalled the scene, for she leaned upon his arm more heavily, and he guessed that she was weeping, from the way in which her handkerchief stole to her eyes at intervals.

“Let us sit here and rest,” said Hugh, not appearing to notice her tears. “I’m so provoked, little one, to think that John Jones has gone off, without staying to the wedding.” At the mention of that name he felt a quiver of the hand he held.

“Why should you—I thought—I didn’t know—”

“That I cared any thing about that young scapegrace. But I do! I like and respect him much, and would have been pleased to have him present at the ceremony. I’ve half a mind to postpone it until he is heard from. Say, puss, do you think you could endure the disappointment?”

He was looking into her face with such a queer look, half-serious, half-sad, as to puzzle her most completely.

“Why, Hugh, what do you mean? do you really wish Mr. Jones to be present, so much as that?—for *my* part, I am glad he is gone.”

“Then *you* don’t wish the ceremony deferred?”

Again she tried to read his countenance; the proposition was so novel a one for an ardent lover to make to his betrothed, for no more urgent reason than the absence of a possible guest,—and that guest a person whom he had never especially favored—that she was surprised and confused.

“In this, as in all else, I shall defer to your superior judgment,” she answered, presently.

“You are a dutiful child, Myrtle,—a dutiful child. You consent to marry me, out of deference to my judgment; and you are ready *not* to marry me, for the same all-powerful reason. I only asked you to see what reply you would make.

Well, my little girl, I want to tell you that I chanced to witness an interview which took place between you and that silly boy—”

“He isn’t a boy,” interrupted Myrtle, proudly.

“Between you and that silly young gentleman, from which I had reason to infer that he was deeply interested in you, and I wished him to be at your wedding.”

“Oh! Mr. Fielding, I did not think you could be so cruel!” exclaimed Myrtle, looking up at him reproachfully.

“Why shouldn’t I be cruel?” he asked, setting his features into a sternness which frightened her. “I have been cruelly treated—twice I have been cruelly disappointed—is it not enough to make a man revengeful?”

“But I have *tried* to do right, oh! Mr. Fielding, I have tried!”

That innocent face turned to his with such a look of pain, the tears streaming down the pale cheeks, made him wish to clasp her in his arms and exclaim—

“Yes, my brave girl, and for all this girlish heroism thou shalt have thy reward!”

While he was still debating whether it was possible for him thus suddenly to immolate himself, another person was added to the scene.

A lady came along the path from the cabin, looking about as if in search of some one. When she caught sight of Myrtle, she paused a moment and looked at her earnestly—but not more earnestly than Hugh was now regarding her. She was a fine-looking woman, of perhaps forty—she looked thirty-five—and beautiful as in her earliest youth. Her bonnet was swinging from her arm, for the day was warm. Her hair was put up in a classic braid behind, and clustered in rich ringlets down either side of her face; her cheeks were as fair as a girl’s, and flushed with exercise, her form was full but graceful, and her step light.

“Is the dead alive?” gasped Hugh.

She heard and saw him not: her eyes were upon the face of the young girl. She threw her bonnet and scarf upon the grass, and ran and clasped her in her arms.

“My child—my own little Minnie! say, are you not?” she cried, holding the surprised girl away from her, so as to gaze again upon her countenance.

"I am Myrtle—Myrtle Fielding. What do you mean?" asked the young girl, confused by this unexpected apparition.

"Fielding!" said the lady, in a voice which thrilled to Hugh's inmost heart. "Hugh Fielding!—was it he who found you?"

"It was."

"And were you lost, fifteen years ago this day, upon a prairie? Speak, speak quickly: are you my child?"

"Are you my mother?" was the response: and the two clasped hands and clung together as if they had longed for each other since the moment they were so terribly separated.

"Myrtle, do I see you again?" said a deep voice beside them.

Both started, but it was not *our* Myrtle who was addressed this time. The lady gave one glance of those still glorious eyes into Hugh's, and sank fainting in his arms.

"Forgive," he heard her whisper, as her senses deserted her.

Myrtle ran for water to the lake, while Hugh supported that beautiful head upon his bosom with a strange emotion. She was sure she saw him kissing those pale cheeks as she hastened back with her straw hat dripping from the wave.

"It was too much," said Mrs. Sherwood, as she came back to life. "It is weak and foolish for well people to faint. But to find my child, and to find you, Hugh!"

"Whose fault was it that you ever lost me?" he asked, with bitterness, as the dreariness of twenty years returned upon his heart.

"Not mine alone," was the reply. "That I was not firm enough in resisting the treacherous lies of a false friend whose pettily *you* could hardly conceive; that man," she added, with a slight shudder, "who perished so fearfully, and who was the father of my child; for that I shall remember him with respect, if not affection."

When Mrs. Sherwood was recovered sufficiently to sit upon the grassy knoll under the tree, and tell the story of the past, while holding tight to her daughter's hand, she gave a brief account, which she afterward made more circumstantial, of what happened after they were surprised by the Indians and her husband murdered. Herself and her companion in suf-

fering, the wife of the other murdered man, were driven off in the wagon ; and in an attempt to escape with her child from the back of the vehicle, she had been detected, and jerked back so rudely as to cause her to drop the infant. They would not pause to pick it up, but hurried on, unmindful of her agony.

She herself chanced to have a knife in her pocket, which she resolved should liberate her by death, if no other chance of succor offered ; and possibly it might be of service in securing her both life and liberty.

The first day, they left the wagon and journeyed on foot through the wilderness. Her companion sank down, and died before night. She journeyed on, urged by the speed of her tormentors, until the second night, when they bound her, hungry, weary, with bleeding feet and anguished heart, to the earth, and went off for water and food, intending to return and camp at that place. They had stopped before reaching water, because she could go no further. As soon as they disappeared down a hill-side, leaving not one to watch her, she cut the throngs which bound her, and ran for her life. She did not know, when she arose, that she could place one foot before the other ; but fear and hope gave her superhuman energy. In a few minutes she came to a stream. In this she waded to put them at fault. The cool water soothed her wounded feet and revived her somewhat. She ran for a long time down the stream, until, coming to a wild place where rocks and ravines promised places of concealment, she made her way up the bank, and, by fortune, stumbled into a cavern, over which she drew the vines which had before concealed it, and lay down in the darkness, for it was now twilight. Overcome by fatigue, she fell asleep, despite her fear of wild animals and her wilder tormentors. When she awoke it was day.

All that day she did not dare to venture out. Some berries were growing among the moss at the mouth of the cave, and with a handful of these she cooled her thirst. Hearing nothing to alarm her, as soon as it again came night, keeping her knife open in her hand, she crept out, and went, as rapidly as her strength would permit, still further away from the place. She walked half the night and slept the rest. The next day

she found berries; the third, she emerged from the woods into a strange country. A single cabin told of civilization. She crawled to the door, and was received by an old woman, whose husband hunted and fished for a living. There she was ill for a month, lying on a bed of buffalo-skins; but the people were as kind to her as they knew how to be. She had some money, but they would not take it. When she was able, the old man accompanied her a couple of days till they reached the edge of a settled country, and left her. She found out that she was a hundred miles from the spot where her husband was murdered. After various trifling adventures, by begging and working, she reached her own home, where every one had long given her up for dead. Her child, she had not a doubt, was dead. They told her about Mr. Fielding's letter, and she then *knew* that her little babe had perished of fright and hunger in the solitary prairie.

It was several years before she recovered entirely from the effects of her suffering and grief. She had never been a happy woman. By the merest chance she had heard, only about four weeks before, of the circumstance of a child being found and adopted by a gentleman near Wakwaka. She had come, impelled by a faint hope, to that city, and there had heard more particulars.

When she ceased her brief and hurried narrative, Hugh took the trembling hand which lay in her lap, and pressed it between his own, as if to assure her that her troubles were over.

"Dear father," whispered Myrtle in his ear, "don't you think you could be persuaded to let me pass as your little daughter, again?"

"Go, pass," he said, laughing, "and find and bring back that boy you sent off in such a hurry, some weeks ago."

CHAPTER IX.

THE DISCOVERED TREASURE.

ARTHEA the story of her escape from the Indians, there yet remained explanations to be given, which their unexpected visitor did not long withhold from Mr. Fielding. That evening, in the private parlor of the hotel at which she was stopping, while Myrtle considerably engaged herself with a book, Mrs. Sherwood whispered a narrative in his ear, which threw one gleam of sunshine over the clouds of the past—it could not undo that dreary past, but it lifted it up with the one golden glory of her truth—"circumstance, that unspiritual god," had been more at fault than the heart he had regarded as so unworthy.

In order to comprehend what part her story had to do with this, it will be necessary to go back to the love affairs of this yet romantic couple, which had terminated in making an old bachelor of Hugh Fielding.

One lovely summer morning, after a night of welcome showers, two young gentlemen, belonging to good society of the old Knickerbocker order, rode out of the city in search of the health and enjoyment to be won by fresh air and vigorous exercise. Both were good riders and had fine animals; and they were not unconscious of the many admiring glances which turned to follow them. There was a peculiar exhilaration in the atmosphere, cleared of impurity by the electric fires of the vanished storm; they passed along by steep-roofed houses and green fields, where now all is city lots covered with monotonous brick blocks. They could see the river gleaming, now upon this side, now upon that; and they cantered on until they reached the old King's bridge, where the Harlem plays the part of a clasp to link the glittering neck-piece of the two broad streams. It was seldom they rode so far as this; but now, the mood being on them, the cool air, the absence of dust, the freshness of the foliage, combining to

make an excursion delightful, they resolved to continue on the road until weary.

They had gone a few miles further, finding constant objects of interest, and being especially pleased with some of the old-fashioned stone farm-houses, when one of them exclaimed, in a suppressed voice :

“ Look—look ! Did you ever see any thing equal to that Fielding ? ”

“ Look at what, Sherwood ? ”

“ At that girl on the porch, of course. ”

They had just emerged from a clump of cedars, which bordered either side of the highway, and came in sight of one of those quaint cottages they had been admiring—built of cobblestone, with steep gables, small windows, and long porch. There are no words of ours which will so well describe the sight they beheld, as these words from Tennyson’s “ Gardener’s Daughter : ”

“ Far up the porch there grew an Eastern rose
That, flowering high, the last night’s gale had caught,
And blown across the walk. One arm aloft—
Gowned in pure white, that fitted to the shape—
Holding the bush, to fix it back, she stood.
A single stream of all her soft brown hair
Poured on one side : the shadow of the flowers
Stole all the golden gloss, and, wavering,
Lovingly lower, trembled on her waist—
Ah, happy shade !—and still went wavering down ;
But, ere it touched a foot that might have danced
The greensward into greener circles, dipt,
And mixed with shadows of the common ground !
But the full day dwelt on her brows, and sunned
Her violet eyes, and all her Hebe-bloom,
And doubled his own warmth against her lips
And on the bounteous wave of such a breast
As never pencil drew. Half-light, half-shade
She stood, a sight to make an old man young. ”

Moved by the same involuntary impulse, the young men checked their horses to prolong the pleasure of this lovely vision ; when she, perceiving them, and that they paused before the gate, dropped the rose-vine, and stood, doubtful, or if not knowing whether to retire or await their errand. Sherwood, the younger and bolder of the two, who never lacked wit in an emergency, took advantage of this hesitation by drawing nearer to the gate, and then taking off his hat :

"Pardon us, mademoiselle; we only wished for a glass of water. We have ridden out from the city, and are very thirsty, or, indeed, we should be sorry to trouble a stranger."

"The cup of cold water is free to all," she answered, smiling slightly at the extreme humility of his apology.

"Then, please, let us help ourselves. We see where it can be found," he said, blushing and laughing; and springing from his horse, he threw the rein to his friend, and bounded over the fence into the yard, at the end of the porch, where, the grass worn away from its vicinity, stood the well-curb, a great old apple-tree overshadowing it, and the bucket swinging from the tall sweep. His slender white hands were not wanting in strength; he pulled down the sweep and drew up the bucket deftly. Scarcely had the silvery treasure come dripping and sparkling into the light, before a servant appeared with a tray bearing a pitcher and two goblets, which the maiden had retired within the house to order. It did not take a second glance to assure the gentlemen that pitcher and tray were of solid silver, and the goblets of cut glass. Charles Sherwood had the pleasure of quaffing the delicious spring-water beside the fountain from which he had drawn it, while Hugh Fielding, left in charge of both horses, had to take his from the hand of the tidy maid-servant. It was surprising how much they contrived to drink, and how much time it took in quenching their thirst, while stolen glances sought the porch and windows in hopes of another glimpse of that young beauty.

She kept within; but in her place came to the steps an old gentleman, who greeted the strangers cheerfully, inquiring the news from the city; and who was easily led, by their civil and gracious answers, into more of that informal friendliness with which farmers, and others living away from the cold etiquette of towns, are apt to be overflowing. Hugh, who had character enough to appreciate fine qualities in others, was charmed with the old gentleman: he kept on talking until the name of the other chanced to be mentioned, when he was glad to find that he had been an acquaintance of his own father's. He knew, through the talk of his own family, that the Vails were old and respected Knickerbockers. His branch had always clung to the country, but had kept up much of

the polish and enlightenment of the city. On the part of the other, when he learned that the young man was a Fielding son of Hugh Fielding, he expressed his pleasure at their chance meeting.

While the three still kept up an animated conversation, the sound of a horn was heard in the back yard.

"Dinner is just on the table, young gentlemen. I shall think it uncivil of you if you refuse to rest and dine with us, before returning upon your long ride. You will feel the need of some refreshment before you reach home."

Sherwood smothered a smile at the mention of dinner. He had been consulting his watch, and found that it was just high noon. It had been their intention to beg or buy a bowl of bread and milk for lunch, at some farm-house, and be home, bathed, dressed and rested, for *their* dinner hour. However, call it by what name they might, breakfast, lunch, or dinner, a meal at that very hour of high noon would not be unacceptable to appetites sharpened by a ride of eighteen miles. The thought of the opportunity this would probably afford of meeting the exquisite creature whom they had interrupted in her morning employment of training the storm-blown roses, thrilled both their hearts. So that it was with an alacrity which lingered for few expressions of fear of intruding, that they accepted the proffered hospitality.

They were permitted, at their own request, to make their toilet at the kitchen door, washing in the bowl which stood on a bench outside, and wiping on the long roller. Then they passed through the kitchen, where a table for the hands was spread, into a dining-room—a long, low apartment, deliciously cool and dim, with roses peeping in at the three windows, a turkey carpet on the floor, and the furniture of rich, heavy mahogany, of an old-fashioned pattern.

Here their host introduced them to his daughter, and to a sister of his own, a kindly-looking spinster, who, the wife being dead several years, occupied the position of head of the household. These three seemed to comprise the family.

The table was laid with extreme neatness and a good deal of luxury; the linen was fine, the china handsome, and the silver almost cumbrous in its richness. The cider which formed the drink was equal to some of the champagne they

might have had in the city ; the boiled ham which made the first course, the stewed chickens which followed, and the custards which came in as dessert, all had the country excellence which the skill of cities can not rival ; while the coffee which closed the repast, dispensed to them in delicate cups of ancient porcelain, tinged with the whitest of crystal sugar and golden with real cream, diffused an aroma of enchantment over the whole.

Sherwood forgot to smile at the horribly early hour ; and as for Hugh Fielding, he was silently blessing the stars which had sent them upon this unstudied excursion, to crown it with this unlooked-for, delightful adventure. While not at all insensible to the charms of the dinner, his very soul was absorbed in contemplation of the young maiden sitting opposite to him, eating her dinner and taking an occasional part in the conversation with a manner of mingled ease and modesty.

Accustomed to the society of refined women, he saw in her a refinement like that of a perfect pearl which needs no touch from the jeweler's hand—a delicate, transparent pureness of mind gleaming through a person of equal loveliness. If she lacked an air of fashion, she had a way of her own, much better ; and she was too intelligent, too really accomplished, to be in any danger of the embarrassments of ignorance. Her dress was suited to her character ; it was simple and not of the latest style, but of costly material, being of the finest India mull, with ruffles of real lace.

Sherwood ate more than Fielding, and talked less ; it was not in his selfish mould to exert himself to reward their host for the great pleasure he was giving them ; he was contented to dine, to look at Miss Vail, and be courteous ; while Hugh, animated by the brilliant concatenation of the bright morning, the pleasant ride, the new acquaintance and the beautiful maiden, and grateful for a hospitality which had led him into this Eden, endeavored to do honor to his hosts by rendering himself as delightful as possible. He listened with deference and talked with ability. He had that truly polite manner which at once engaged the favor of the old gentleman ; who avowed himself, at the close of the repast, obliged to his young friends for the lively *goût* they had given to his dinner ; hoped they would call whenever they felt disposed to ride so

far, and made them welcome to the future acquaintance of his household.

It is not therefore to be supposed that Mr. Vail kept "open house" to all strangers who chanced that way. Oh, no! he had caution and prudence enough for common purposes; but it happened that he was familiar, by hearsay, with the reputation of one of his guests, whose father, as we have said, he had once known quite well; he had heard, in some indirect manner which he did not trouble to recall, of Hugh's excellent character and talents; the fact that Charles Sherwood was in his company, was guaranty of *his* respectability; and thus a chance meeting was the beginning of a friendly acquaintance.

The young men rode back to town that afternoon, feeling as if an angel had opened some little side gate and given them unexpected permission to make a morning call in Paradise. Sherwood was full of conversation, praising the beauty of the young lady and the charming, home-like air of the quaint old country-place. But Hugh was unusually silent; he had been impressed too deeply to be willing to express his feelings to another. There was a tinge of romance in his character, an earnestness and enthusiasm which had never been quite satisfied with the sympathy of any of the women he had met, accomplished and good as many of them were. All this long hidden spring of passion within him had burst its bounds at the sight of Myrtle Vail, overflowing his heart and fancy with silver tides of delight.

When he had seen her exquisite manners, heard her gentle conversation, looked earnestly into her eyes, he knew that he had at last met his ideal of feminine perfection. He wanted no long weeks or months of observation to assure him that it would "be prudent" to allow himself to "fall in love." He did love, already, and because he could not help it. All his wonder, all his trouble, as they rode slowly homeward, was—whether he could possibly hope to attract her as she had attracted him. Some men, with his advantages, would have felt no diffidence on this score; but true merit and pure love are usually timid of their own worth; and the fact that he was courted in brilliant society, did not make him any the bolder when he thought of his new acquaintance.

Unhappily for herself and them, the country maiden made two conquests on that memorable day. Charles was equally impressed with Hugh; though in a different manner, in accordance with his different character. It was the unusual, overpowering beauty and graceful ways of the girl which infatuated him; made him avow himself "smitten," "in love," "desperate," and all that; yet if these charms of hers had not been supported by the substantial surroundings of good family and evident prosperity, they would have failed of their full effect. While Hugh would have taken her, she being the same as she was, had she come barefooted like the beggar-maid whom King Cohopua made his queen, for Charles she would have had to come accredited with the rank of a *bona fide* princess.

And there was this one little thing to excuse him: he had his success in life yet to achieve. While Hugh was rich and independent, practicing his profession simply for the dignity of having something to do, with family and friends to help him up the ladder of ambition, he, Charles, was poor, struggling into a slow practice as a lawyer, where older and abler men held the ground; and, while moving, by virtue of his friends, among those wealthier than himself, feeling many of the stings of keeping up a position above his means. For instance, the horse which he rode this day was not his own, but Hugh's; he would not have dared indulge in the expensive luxury of a morning's ride, had not his kind and delicate friend placed an animal at his disposal with the air of one receiving a favor, saying that he did not care to go out alone, and that his rides were dreary without a lively companion. For bosom friends, men usually choose their opposites; and Hugh really liked the gay and not altogether good young man, better than any other of his associates.

Now, as they rode along together, it pleased him to listen to the gay praises which he would not have cared himself to have uttered. Charles was always so infatuated with every pretty face, and so extravagant in his habits of talk, that he did not think of him as seriously impressed. And, after the little excursion was over, for the next few days, when the two met, but little mention was made of it. That it was because the hearts of both were too full of it, neither at first guessed of the other.

Hugh vexed his ingenuity with an excuse for repeating his visit at the house of Mr. Vail; and no good device arising to relieve him of his embarrassment, he boldly decided to make no other claim than his desire to further an acquaintance whose beginning had given him so much pleasure. If Myrtle guessed that it was herself who had the power to draw him so far, so much the better; she would then, by her manner, either encourage or discourage him. Unwilling to have even his dearest friend detect the secret, until he knew whether his suit would be favored, he galloped off one afternoon without the usual invitation to Charles to accompany him. Again a night morning shower had made the roads in such perfection as to provoke and justify the ride. At a speed which tried the endurance of his horse, he hurried toward the spot from which his thoughts had hardly been absent; as he neared the turn in the road which would bring him in sight of the mansion, he checked his course, going slowly forward, hesitating between fear and eagerness. A cold feeling of amazement and jealousy dashed him in the face as it came in view. There was a group of persons upon the porch, enjoying the light wind, rose-perfumed and fresh with recent rain, so grateful on a summer afternoon. Mr. Vail, paper and spectacles in hand, unused, was leaning back in an easy-chair, smiling at some just uttered sally; his sister, with her knitting, sat on the rustic sofa at the end of the porch; leaning over her father's chair, her fleecy pink dress floating about her like a sunset cloud about a star, her sweet face turned attentively to what some one was saying and doing, was Miss Vail. It was the recognition of this "some one" which dismayed Hugh. Sitting on the steps, in an attitude of careless grace, his hat in the grass at his feet, was his friend Sherwood, whom he had thought to leave behind in all the bliss of ignorance. It was some charming thing he was saying which had brought the smile to the old gentleman's face and secured that air of attention from the young girl. His horse and buggy stood on the opposite side of the road, where he had secured them.

For an instant, Hugh was tempted to turn back. A consciousness of his own desire to conceal his visit mingled with a real pain at this discovery of another's similar intention.

His own motives revealed to him plainly those of his friend. He felt, in a moment, that they were rivals. He was no coward, however; and he felt that he had a right to try his fortunes, as they had both made the discovery of this treasure in the same day. It would be no injustice to his friend to allow the maiden a choice of suitors. If their suits were honorably and generously preferred, he would abide his chance, whatever his fate might be. So he rode straight up to the gate, dismounted, tied his horse, shook hands with his host, who came down the walk to receive him, and faced the ordeal. Both Charles and the young lady blushed as he greeted them; his own color was tranquil, for he had had time to compose himself.

"I did not know you were coming this way to-day, Sherwood."

"Nor I that you were. A curious coincidence"—laughing. "I had business with a person on an estate three or four miles from here, and chancing so near them, I could not deny myself the pleasure of coming the rest of the way to inquire after the health of these friends, and thank them again for their hospitality which conferred so much pleasure on us a few days ago."

"And I have come all the way from the city solely to do myself that pleasure," said Hugh, with his usual frankness; "and to prove that I prize your offer of further acquaintance, Mr. Vail, by doing my best to promote it."

He made a call of nearly an hour before rising to go. The invitation to stop for tea was declined; Hugh had an engagement, and must reach the city by eight o'clock, and Charles would return in his company. Some refreshments were served where they sat on the rose-shadowed porch, and they departed, this time with the understanding that they were to be future visitors. Hugh ventured to offer his hand to the maiden, as well as to her elders, when saying his farewells; and the look he won from her eyes, as she shook hands with him, rewarded him for the long ride he had taken to win it. Of course, in that brief visit, where the politeness due to the other guest would prevent any preference, if any were felt, neither of the young men could guess what chance there might be of either of them being particularly favored. It was

probable that the thought of her own part in the affair scarcely occurred to the inexperienced young girl. Whatever the wise aunt or her father might suspect in the extreme civility of their young guests, Myrtle was innocent of her conquests—as innocent as she was of her own exceeding worth.

That these two gentlemen, directly from the gay circles of the metropolis, should have been particularly charmed with her quiet self, never entered her mind. She did not wonder that they thought the old homestead pleasant, or her father interesting, or her aunt a lady, for she thought the same herself. Their opinion of herself scarcely caused her a question; she had been too recently a child to consider herself of much importance.

And yet, why did Mr. Fielding look at her so when he went away? She had dreamed of him very often since their first meeting; many times the sewing had lain idle in her lap, or the rose dropped from her listless fingers, while she recalled each sentence he had spoken, every inflection of his voice, his eyes, his smile. She regarded him as superior to any man she had ever met, and so handsome, and so learned—yet when she mentioned the visit to her father and aunt, it was always easiest to speak of Mr. Sherwood.

“Mr. Sherwood is very delightful, and witty, and all that,” her aunt had said; “just the person to please foolish girls, I suppose; but *I* like Mr. Fielding much better. There is some stamina to his character.”

And Myrtle had blushed with pleasure to find her good opinion confirmed by her aunt's, and had kept a happy silence.

After this second visit, she was haunted by the dark eyes of Mr. Fielding. She had no clue to their meaning, for the password which lets young souls into Eden—“love”—had never been whispered to her. She only knew that they warmed her through like sunshine, and made her heart leap up and her own glance fail—that even in remembrance they had power to make her cheeks burn, and her pulse beat fast.

She began to muse apart, and to start and blush when she heard the sudden clatter of horses' hoofs along the road. There was some new power in life which gave to the air she breathed a fresher sweetness, and made her glance linger longer upon the sunset, the blue sky, the opening flowers.

In the mean time, what of the ride homeward of the two friends? Hugh allowed his horse to keep beside the buggy; they chatted together as usual; there was no apparent interruption of friendly feeling; yet each was conscious of a change. Something had come between them. The visible fact that each had intended to keep his visit a secret from the other, betrayed the first break in the confidence which had existed. One of them began to nourish a bitterness which a careless observer would have said was inconsistent with his apparently trifling character. But Charles Sherwood, fond of luxury and gayety, was therefore the more determined to place himself in a situation where he could have the very cream of life, without the labor to which he was now obliged to apply himself. A wife, young, beautiful *and rich*, had been the load-star of his course. If love, too, could be had, so much the better. He was now as much in love as was possible to his nature. It seemed to him a wrong inflicted upon him by the fates that Hugh should step in to rob him of the advantage he hoped to gain—Hugh, who had already so many of the best things of life, and who could marry almost any woman he might honor with his regard. Why should *he* have taken it into his head to surrender his hitherto impregnable heart to this little country girl? Why? Plainly because he, Charles, had become interested in her. Fate was always snatching from him every chance treasure he picked up. Reflections like this, growing more passionate and bitter, disturbed him. Having once planted the thistle of envy, it grew and rankled in his breast.

In those days it was still the custom of all classes of the community to celebrate "Independence Day." The old Knickerbockers had not then given up this pleasant privilege entirely to boys and servants. A very short time after their second visit to the old homestead, the friends joined a party of young people in getting up a grand frolic for the Fourth of July, to be held at King's Bridge.

"You needn't trouble yourself to ride out to Mr. Vail's; I went yesterday, and secured the consent of Miss Myrtie to attend the pie-nic. I am invited to come out the day before, so as to be in season at the bridge on the morning. Got ahead of you again, Hugh. You must be more alert."

The air of triumph with which Charles made this announcement, some three or four days before the Fourth, was vexing to the soul of Hugh. All his anticipated pleasure vanished. He had intended to solicit the presence of Miss Vail as the crowning grace of the festival. He had dreamed of the bliss of being with her all that summer day amid the woods, and rocks, and waterfalls of the picturesque spot they had chosen—of perhaps an opportunity of whispering the first of those assurances which should drop into her ear and heart to bud and blossom, and prepare the way for the final declaration soon to follow.

Instead of this, his rival had secured the golden opportunity. Not even pride sufficed him to conceal his chagrin. He would take no lady now, but a young married sister whose husband was temporarily absent, and could not be her escort.

The morning of "Independence Day" was glorious enough to justify the roar of artillery with which it was saluted; and what was better, the day kept the promise of the morning. The affair at King's Bridge was as brilliant as its projectors desired. It was

"A pic-nic! a pic-nic! so happy together!
All elegant women and good-looking men!"

And through all the hours of the festival, no sudden thunder-shower came to make of it

"A pic-nic! a pic-nic! so wretched together!
All draggle-tailed women and cross-looking men!"

It was the realization of an ideal pic-nic, at which everybody was as happy as he or she anticipated, except poor Hugh. The shadow of disappointment hung over him, though there was not a cloud in the sky. All day the shadow was visible upon his face. He devoted himself to no one but his own pretty sister. Once, as he brought her an ice, and stood by her while she was "trilling with it," he encountered the eyes of Myrtle Vail bent on them both with a fixed, interested gaze. Charles was by her side, twining her a wreath from a grape-vine close at hand, but she did not appear to be hearing whatever he was saying. His sister had already inquired who the lovely young stranger was; he had hoped to make the two ladies acquainted on this day, and win some opinion from his sister in approval of his own liking. He had been

go out of spirits that he had not exerted himself to bring about the introduction. Now, when he met Myrtle's questioning glance, he offered his companion his arm, and walked over to where she stood.

"Your sister?" said Myrtle, aside to Mr. Fielding, after being presented to Mrs. Manning. "I thought it was your—your—she is so very young to be a bride," she added, blushing.

"My what? my betrothed?" replied Hugh, with a smile. "Well, that is a person whose acquaintance I have yet to make. I wish I could hope for one as good and as pretty."

"She would be hard to find," said Myrtle, with an admiring glance at the lovely young wife, and an air of utter unconsciousness of her own far more perfect beauty.

"She might be hard to win, but not so hard to find," was the earnest answer, in a tone which even she could not entirely fail to comprehend was meant for herself; she had not art enough to pretend to misunderstand; but, covered with blushes, she turned to conceal them by taking from Mr. Sherwood the wreath he had finished.

This little action of a bashful girl Hugh received as intended to convey discouragement; his spirits again fell; leaving his sister to chat with the friends, he wandered off disconsolately. In the conversation which followed, Mrs. Manning discovered that one of the city families with whom she was on visiting terms was related to Miss Vail, who came occasionally to see them, do her shopping, and enjoy some of the amusements of the town. Charmed with Myrtle, she urged her to make one of those visits soon, that she might have the pleasure of seeing her at her own house; the promise was given; which in the cool October weather was kept.

CHAPTER X.

THE RIVALRY.

"MYRTLE, you *must not* refuse me. I can not bear it. Why is it? Do you doubt my standing, my character, my prospects, or my *love*? I know that I am now comparatively poor, but I shall not always be. I shall succeed in my profession. I shall make you proud of me."

"It is not that, Mr. Sherwood. It is not because you are not more than worthy of me in every respect—that I do not honor and respect you. I do. It is only that—that—"

"You love another," he burst forth, fiercely. "I see it all. You love Hugh Fielding, and you despise me."

The couple stood in the orchard which skirted one side of the old homestead. Charles had made many visits, more than Hugh, since the Fourth of July, and now, during one of these, he had taken advantage of an expedition into the orchard after a basket of peaches, to say what he had long desired.

Myrtle's cheeks grew redder than the fruit or the boughs above her head, as he made this last accusation, in a bitter, passionate tone. For an instant she looked down; the next she raised her eyes:

"I have said that I do not despise you, Mr. Sherwood. I have, thus far, regarded you very highly, and I wish to be able to continue to do so."

It seemed as if her quiet dignity only drove him deeper into despair.

"I do not want your regard—I can not bear it, Myrtle. I want all or nothing. Yes, I know—you would have loved me had it not been for Hugh. He is my superior in every thing—in manners, in mind, in fortune. I do not wonder that you prefer him. It is always so. He is my rival in every thing. It ought to have been enough for him that he possessed every thing to make his life brilliant, that he outshone

me everywhere, without his stepping in to rob me of that dearest treasure, those riches for which I would give all the rest of the world—your love, Myrtle. It is enough to make me hate him.”

“You must not talk to me about Mr. Fielding. There is nothing between us to justify it,” said the maiden turning toward the house.

“Stop one moment—one moment. Has he not told you that he loved you? Then perhaps I am mistaken. Perhaps he does *not* love you. He is fickle—that every one knows—and I did suppose him engaged to a lady of Philadelphia; but I had heard nothing of it recently, and I thought—I did not see how he could *help* falling at your feet. Do not think too much of him, Myrtle, let me warn you. He has only to solicit a woman’s heart to obtain it, and he knows his power. While I—you are my *all*, my only. Ah, Myrtle, retract what you have said; give me some leave to hope.”

“I can not, Mr. Sherwood; you only distress me.”

She was walking on; he ground his teeth in passion and anger as he walked behind her; he had wooed her persistently and audaciously from the first; he could not give her up. Yet there was, at present, nothing more to be said; he took the basket from her arm, and they returned to the house in silence. His mortification was too great for him to attempt to conceal it; he refused the invitation to stay to tea, riding home supperless.

If he was deeply chagrined himself, he had also left an arrow in the bosom of another; all that evening Myrtle sat by her chamber window, thinking not so much of her “first offer,” as of the sting in Mr. Sherwood’s assertion—“He has only to solicit a woman’s heart to obtain it, and he knows his power.” She was covered with confusion to think that the secret she had not acknowledged to her own most hidden thoughts had been rudely dragged forth by another; and her pride was up in arms at the suggestion that Mr. Fielding knew that he had only to ask it and it would be his. Supposing Mr. Fielding really had breathed to her such words of love as Charles had done, would he not have had a very different answer? The maiden hid her face, even from the tender light of the holy stars, as her heart answered her. *Ah*

to cool her burning cheeks on her folded arms. She would not dream of it; it was unmaidenly. She would not allow herself to imagine the sweet thrill which would have trembled through her being—*would* have trembled, for *now*, were he to speak, she would be slow and cold to answer. If he was so skilled in winning women's hearts, he should find that hers was hard to yield to his triumphant dictation.

Foolish child! Like dead leaves before a rushing wind, her idle fancies of doubt and pride were swept away, when, in less than a week from that evening, Hugh, with all the timidity yet earnestness of real love, placed his fortune and happiness in her hands. She never thought of pride when she yielded to the joy which filled her as she allowed him to see that she loved him. She never wondered that he had chosen *her*, when he could have made a more brilliant choice; yet she was modest and humble as the lilies-of-the-valley in her own secluded garden. It seemed to her, as to him, the most proper and natural thing in the world, the only right thing, that they should love each other. They had a blissful confidence that they were made for one another; they had that blissful faith which is the star of youth and love.

Myrtle's father and aunt had no objections to urge against her lover; they consented to the betrothal, feeling that she had chosen well. Indeed, the aunt was quite happy to find that her own predilections in favor of the graver suitor had also been those of her niece; she had feared that the volatile, not entirely trustworthy Charles would win, with his wit and grace, the fancy of the untried girl.

So that when Myrtle made her long-talked-of October visit to her relatives in the city, she was the betrothed of Hugh, whose sister and family called upon her, were satisfied with her, and helped to make her visit agreeable. It was not proposed to allow the engagement to become public, as Myrtle's family objected to her marrying for at least a year, she being so young. It was not displeasing to Hugh to observe that wherever she went she was liked and admired. She attended several evening gatherings, and at those places she met Mr. Sherwood, but not at other times, saving a formal call upon her arrival. In the mean time the coldness between the two friends increased; that is, Charles avoided his successful rival.

came seldom to his house or office, and had no more confidences to make. Hugh understood that his own happiness and hopes would be a painful subject to them, and so allowed the intercourse to drop.

Myrtle's visit in the city was prolonged from week to week her friends urging her stay and her heart being no ways loth; for winter, with its rough roads, did not promise so well for frequent excursions into the country as the summer had done, unless the sleighing season should be a good one.

But there came suddenly a shock to her pleasure. Hugh was summoned to New Orleans on important business, which, if he did it the justice his clients expected in employing him, would keep him fully six months. At first he resolved to decline the business, but it was an affair in which he had already become complicated, which he understood better than a new lawyer could very well do, and in which friends and old clients had placed large interests in his care. Under these circumstances, it seemed proper that he should not consult his own pleasure too entirely. He quieted Myrtle's regret as much as possible by assurances of the healthiness of New Orleans in the winter, of the long and frequent letters he should write, and of the resolve he had made that this parting over, it should be the last—he would not wait, he averred, for the close of their year of betrothal—the roses of June should blossom beneath their honeymoon; and he kissed away the tears which fell lightly over her blushes.

And so they parted; their present trouble illumined by glowing hope. Alas! neither of them foresaw how long would be that parting, and how strange would be their reunion. That only in a second youth would they fulfill the promise of the first.

The news which gave regret to the lovers gave pleasure to Charles. When Hugh came to bid him good-by, before sailing, a purpose came into his mind to turn this absence to good account. Even while he pressed the hand of his unsuspecting friend, a hope that he should be able to steal his coveted treasure away from him sprung up in his bosom. Instead of being pulled up by the roots and thrown out in fear and self-reproach, it was watered and tended with a care which caused it to flourish into baleful strength. A nature

given over to envy is easily blinded to truth and justice. What Charles Sherwood coveted, that, he persuaded himself, he ought to obtain. He formed a settled purpose to instill doubt of her absent lover into Myrtle's heart, and to occupy the place there from which he should drive out his rival. In furtherance of this object, he renewed his intimacy with Hugh, by writing him a letter, proposing that they should keep up a correspondence through the winter. He further suggested, that as Myrtle, now in her own home, was not near any post-office, and as the small village at which the Vails usually obtained their mail matter was not very reliable during the season of bad roads, Hugh had better direct her letters under cover to him. Should he think best to do so, he would take every trouble to send a special messenger with them immediately when he could not take them himself.

Hugh, himself as frank as the sunshine, approved of this suggestion, thanking his friend for the kindness. It can easily be seen that Charles had now an opportunity for practicing a duplicity of which his peculiar moral organization rendered him capable. Madly in love, and urged by ambition and envy, as well as by passion, having yielded to the first temptation there was no receding from the guilt upon which he had entered.

Having withheld Hugh's letters until Myrtle was sick with anxiety, he managed very cleverly to comfort her with the assurance that neither sickness nor accident had befallen him—there could be nothing serious the matter—he had heard from him, and his relatives had occasional missives, in which he avowed himself benefited by the climate, and highly pleased with the gay society into which he had been tempted to go, first by curiosity to observe Southern manners, and finally by interest. He threw out not the faintest suspicion, whispered not one word of doubt which might arouse her resentment; only, when the poor child's face grew white, and her lips quivered with the unspoken question, "If he has written to others, why not to me?" he looked at her sadly and pityingly.

All that wretched winter there came to her no tidings, only through others, of how well he was, and how brilliant was New Orleans. Not one line from him—not one word—only once or twice, his regards, and formally through the medium

of Mr. Sherwood. This was worse than neglect—it was insult.

By spring the young lady was ready to receive the sympathy which Charles now for the first time ventured to speak; her heart, half broken, and wounded almost to death in its sensitive pride, turned to listen to his avowal that he had feared from the first that business in New Orleans was only a pretense of Fielding's, to shake off the chains with which he had too hastily bound himself.

“Did I not warn you, Myrtle, that he was vain of his many triumphs, and that he loved to prove his power? His success is too pleasing to his egotism; he is unwilling yet to fetter himself; and having, in a moment of enthusiasm at your beauty, sought your avowal of love, he now recedes from his position in this unmanly manner. It is like him. Myrtle, I am sure your pride teaches you to despise him. Prove to him that you, too, can be careless and forgetful—that your heart, also, was but lightly touched—that heart which he casts aside, but which I would have thrown my own beneath the wheel of fate, but to have protected from a pang. It is I who have loved you, who have suffered, who have watched your pale face and sad eyes this winter, with a feeling of contempt for the man who could wantonly dim their girlish luster. It is I only who have truly loved you. Oh, Myrtle, your own pain ought to teach you how to pity mine. Let me comfort you—let me be the shield to your pride. I do not ask you to love me—not yet. Only let me love you unrebuked—only compassionate what I have endured in watching your course with another.”

Day by day his importunity grew more passionate; and as time dragged by, he excited all the resentment of her gentle nature against her fancied wrongs, while he pleaded powerfully his own cause. Miserable to the depths of her soul, the more so that she was undecided if her present motives were right, she allowed him to persuade her. The fear that when Mr. Fielding returned he would, if he saw her at all, read in her changed appearance what she had suffered on his account, more even than her real pity for Mr. Sherwood, finally induced her to accept his repeated offers.

The same motive urged her to consent to a speedy

marriage. This latter step Charles had reason to be solicitous about. He knew that Hugh, latterly anxious at not hearing from his betrothed, would seize the first opportunity of return. He was glad enough to learn, in a late letter, in which Hugh expressed extreme anxiety at the loss of Myrtle's missives, "which she *must* have sent," he said, that an unexpected turn of affairs had compelled a tiresome, and to him almost unbearable delay, of two months more. Before the expiration of those two months, he resolved that marriage should make all secure. An explanation would then be improbable if not impossible. To this speedy wedding, Myrtle, too, in her restless uneasiness, consented. In vain her judicious aunt warned her against hasty resolves and fickleness of mind. For once the sweetest of dispositions was wayward, and the gentlest of wills was inexorable. To conceal from herself and others the want of confidence she felt in her own resolves, she was as brilliant and capricious as a butterfly. Her good father, unskilled in woman's wiles, could not read this new leaf in his daughter's character. He was glad to see her more like herself than she had recently been; he liked Charles only second to his former estimate of Hugh; he was anxious for his only darling's happiness, and sought to secure it, by making the best of her present relations. He gave her freely money for every thing she desired. Curiously—if it were not too true to human nature to be curious—the maiden who had broidered her wedding-garments in secret, pondering over her happiness as something too precious to be alluded to, when she expected to marry the man she loved, now that she had formed this new engagement, was willing it should be as public as possible, and was busy with plans for a brilliant wedding. She wanted beautiful clothes, a fine party, and a trip to Saratoga, then the most fashionable of summer resorts.

So it chanced that, one morning in June, the anniversary of the day upon which the two friends had rode forth first to the old homestead, many carriages were rolling in that direction.

The day was propitious; a fit day for a bridal, brilliant, fragrant, full of the songs of birds and the perfume of flowers. The quaint house was all a-bloom, to its very gables, with roses; and inside, the charm of taste and exquisite neatness

had thrown a fresh grace upon all the rich, old-fashioned rooms.

The guests came willingly. Myrtle, in her chamber, heard the approach of each carriage; felt that the hour was drawing nigh, but she had lost herself in a reverie, and sat, with a light shawl thrown over her shoulders, heedless of the pleasant labor of dressing which was yet to be done. One of the young ladies, a neighbor and friend, who was to stand as bridesmaid, having completed her own toilette, peeped impatiently through the curtains.

"Why Myrtle, there is the clergyman—and there is Mr. Sherwood himself, just arriving! It is after eleven, and the ceremony is fixed for twelve."

Her aunt also came in and chided her for being dilatory. With an effort like that with which a live man buried strives to cast off the earth which is killing him, she threw off the cold, clod-like feeling which all the morning had weighed her down. With a laugh only a little too gay to be natural for a bride, she began her hurried preparations. She was glad to be hurried, as it gave her less time to think. As it was, the bridegroom knocked twice at the door before the veil was over her hair, the bouquet on her bosom.

Gay, animated, looking and acting his best, none of his friends doubted that Charles Sherwood was perfectly satisfied with his choice. He, too, was a little feverish in his brilliancy. He was impatient to see Myrtle, to call her his own; he dreaded lest some accident should yet snatch her from him.

When she came out of her chamber and stood beside him in her bridal attire, the feeling of remorse and self-reproach which had constantly gnawed within him vanished in exultation. She was so beautiful, that to make her his, by any means, was a triumph so great as to overwhelm the voice of conscience.

As the couple and their attendants came before the minister, those who had not previously met the bride no longer wondered at the satisfaction in the manner of the bridegroom. And of all the company who gazed upon the handsome couple, only the self-apprehensive aunt guessed that she was not as happy as her partner. The flush upon her cheek was deep and warm; doubtless the drooped lashes shadowed shining worlds of joy.

The ceremony was completed. The binding words had been spoken, and the relatives were kissing the bride and wishing the couple joy, when the clatter of horse's hoofs, which ceased at the gate, attracted attention. The windows were open, the curtains looped back with garlands of flowers, and Myrtle's eyes followed those of many others to the gate, where the rider was dismounting. The bridegroom felt a slight, nervous clutch of the hand resting on his arm, which caused him also to look forth.

"Some friend has arrived too late," said one of the company.

The friend who had arrived too late was Hugh Fielding. Too late, indeed!

Dressed in the garments of a traveler, rusty from a sea voyage and dusty from the hasty morning's ride, he cast a surprised glance at the collection of carriages and other evidences of an unusual occurrence. The thought that *some one* might be dead was perhaps the fear which for an instant checked his steps; but a glance at the gay windows banished that fancy, and he hastened on. It was the aunt who met him at the hall door.

"You have come at a strange time," she said, pressing his hand to express her silent sympathy. "Let me tell you before you go in, Myrtle and Charles have just been married."

He stood in the vestibule, from which a pair of folding-doors opened into the low, square parlor. Raising his eyes he saw the bridal pair, where they stood at the head of the room receiving the congratulations of the company. Sherwood was pale as death, and looking down. For an instant his eyes met those of the bride; the sudden agony in his own was answered by a terrified, questioning appeal from hers. It was but an instant—swiftly as the appearance of a ghost, he came and went. It might almost have been a fancy. Old Mr. Vall rubbed his spectacles, doubting his senses; sighed and shook his head, as the little cloud of dust disappeared along the edge of the grove.

To the guests the incident had not much meaning. Those who knew the unexpected visitor, laid his sudden return and the momentary embarrassment of the bridegroom to the score of former jealousies. Some went so far as to say they had

heard rumors of an engagement once existing between the bride and Mr. Fielding. The interesting event of the wedding-breakfast fortunately occurred in season to divert attention in that direction.

By an effort of which she did not before know she was capable, Myrtle maintained her outward composure. She only wished that all was over, the scene, the day, the future, life itself. If she could, in the first misery of her false position, have rushed from it into the grave, she would have been glad to have hidden herself there.

Yes, in the moment during which she had looked into Hugh's eyes, she had read his truth there. Whatever accident might have been the cause of his seeming perfidy, she now saw that he had not been false; and she only wondered that any proof whatever had ever caused her to doubt him. She had loved him because he was noble and frank; she saw him again, noble and truthful still, in every expression of the worshiped face—and oh, with such a wretchedness there, the result of her own conduct. She despised her own weakness. She felt the wickedness of her actions, in the false vows she had just taken—vows which, now, it would be more hopeless than ever to attempt to keep rightly. She did not care to know what had kept her from hearing from him. She must put aside all thoughts of it now. By her want of faith she had ruined the happiness of both. Now there was only left to drink, without undignified grimace, the bitter cup she had steeped for herself.

She did not suspect the bad part her husband had played in the matter. Utter hatred and contempt of the man she vowed to love and honor was not as yet forced upon her. She still felt as if, in the mischief which had been wrought by her waywardness, it was her duty to make him as happy as she could.

And so this wedding-day, to outward appearance so unusually promising, to her was the most wintry of her life. After the breakfast, the wedded pair set off for Saratoga. For six weeks the bride was the beauty of the season.

When Mr. and Mrs. Sherwood returned to New York, Mr. Fielding had sailed for Europe. He had loved, according to the strength of his nature. He had planted his hopes once.

and when they were so rudely uprooted and cast away, he planted no second harvest. When he had arrived from New Orleans, the anxiety he felt to learn the cause of the non-reception of letters, along with the sweet wish to gaze again upon the face he loved, had been paramount to all other considerations. Without waiting to see his clients, and with only a brief call at his own home to obtain his favorite swift horse, he had ridden to the old homestead.

The impression he there received of the caprice of woman was deep enough to nearly make a misanthrope of a most cheerful and generous man. As unwitting as Myrtle of the deception which had been practiced, he set down her broken engagement to the fact that she could not withstand, during his absence, the graces and flatteries of his friend. He blamed Charles Sherwood for his unfriendly course much less than he did the girl who had allowed herself to be wooed and won in his absence. The blow to his happiness was fatal to his ambition. He resolved to go to Europe simply to get rid of the slow days and months; and here he remained until time had dulled the sharpness of the first pang. When he returned to America, he made no inquiries after the false and lost; his parents were dead, his sister was happy with her own little family, he cared not to resume the profession of the law; he had money enough for all his tastes and wants. Urged by that restlessness which comes of having no fixed purpose in life, he started off on a wild, romantic journey through the unpeopled regions of the West.

CHAPTER XI.

FEARS OF SORROW.

In the mean time, the curse of evil-doing seemed to have descended upon Charles Sherwood. Nothing prospered with him, according to his liking. Mr. Vail, the father of his wife, died; and then came forward a relative, who had revived a long-dormant defect in the title of the property he left; and, despite the earnest resistance of her husband, himself well versed in the intricacies of the law, the possessions of Mrs. Sherwood were swept from her. The beautiful farm—which had grown and increased in value every year—the old homestead, was taken from her and occupied by others. This was a severer blow to her husband than to her. He had married her as much for her wealth as for love. The money which she brought him he invested with characteristic want of prudence, and lost it all. At his profession he did not particularly thrive. Fond as he was of the peculiar atmosphere of a metropolis, he was forced to the conclusion that the only remedy for his failing fortunes lay in emigrating to the West.

The fame of the marvelous growth of Wakwaka reached him; he knew that a lawyer, well versed in the business of land-titles, etc., would be apt to do well; and by purchasing valuable property which might come in his way he should grow rich with the growth of the town, and might yet count up his hundreds of thousands.

To Mrs. Sherwood the West had no great terrors. The death of her father weighed upon her spirits, more than the loss of property. Her dear, good aunt, her second mother, disliked Charles so much that she refused to live with them—there did not seem a tie to bind her to her birthplace. To heighten the depression of spirits with which she struggled, many facts to which she could not shut her eyes had arisen to impair her confidence in her husband, and to arouse her

suspicious of the part he had played in his desperate purpose to win her hand. She strove with the dislike which these discoveries occasioned; but she could not teach herself to love him. Only upon the beautiful child, with which God had blessed her, in the midst of her desolation, was her soul poured out in passionate love. The babe was innocent, was hers—**she could love it without stint.**

The disastrous termination of the journey which the Sherwoods, in company with another married couple wishing to emigrate, began with so much expectation, is already known. For Charles Sherwood, the gay, the graceful, the pet of society, to lose his life at the hands of murderous savages, was a strange and terrible decree of Providence. The agony of the mother when that tender babe was cast aside upon the solitary prairie—the little, loving child which had been given to her in recompense for the loss of all other love—mothers may faintly guess at, but words would hardly venture to picture. That she escaped with her life, a broken hearted woman, is almost miraculous; but thus it was, and for long years her life was scarcely touched with one gilding ray of sunshine.

He, upon his part, was uneasy lest she should become aware of his guilt and should despise him. The same selfishness which had induced him to obtain her at all hazards, made him, now that she was his, determine that she should love and honor him, whether her heart would or no. He could not but feel that he had won an empty promise—that the bright eye dimmed beneath his endeavor to compel its fondness, the fair cheek paled instead of blooming into warmer beauty. He was restless and impatient. He had the wife he had coveted—but not her love—her soul was as distant from his as if they moved in different spheres. His restlessness made him constantly demand tokens of affection from her. If she did not fly to meet him when he came, if she did not constantly demonstrate affection by words and caresses, he was angry, accusing her of coldness and dislike. Poor Myrtle! married, without love, to one so exacting and capricious, hers was a hard part to play well and gracefully. She did her best, trying conscientiously to do her duty.

But of all the cruel stings with which he used to wound her in his vexed moods, was the accusation which he

sometimes made, when he found her pale or depressed, that she still loved Hugh Fielding. One would suppose he would have avoided this subject for his own sake if not for hers. But with a kind of mad folly, he would drag it up when it should have been kept from sight. The sharpness of the pain he thus inflicted upon his wife was in the fact which she could not conceal from herself, that his accusation was too true—that she *did* love him, though she struggled now with her love firmly bent to destroy it. At times Charles would falter, when, after this maddest taunt of hers, he saw her face slowly whiten, and her eyes fix upon his with haughty scorn, as if she despised him for tearing the veil from the sorrow of her heart—a sorrow which *he* had fixed there.

One of the motives which had also helped him to his decision to emigrate, was the hope that when he made entirely new associations for his wife, the past would have less influence over her—he might, in time, win her affections—and also a dread of encountering the man whom he had wronged, who might at any time return from abroad; when, they both moving in the same circles, it would be impossible for them to entirely avoid each other.

Perhaps Myrtle was moved by somewhat similar feelings; she may have thought that it would be easier to fulfill her duties in a new and novel sphere, than here, where there was so much to wound and exasperate. She consented readily to the proposition made to go to the West.

Doubtless Myrtle would have sunk under the weight of accumulated misfortune had it not been for the tender cherishing of the poor, blighted flower by her aunt, who once more took her to her bosom with all the kindness of a mother. This aunt, after their ejection from their home and her refusal to live with the Sherwoods, had taken up her abode in a small village at some distance from the city, and from their former residence. Supported by a small patrimony of her own, she was enabled to offer a shelter to the child, who, not yet twenty years of age, was a widow and childless, who had so recently lost her father, and whose worldly possessions had likewise been nearly all swept away.

Their change of abode was probably the reason why the letter of inquiry which was sent from Wakwaka after the

finding of the babe upon the prairie, never received any answer.

Year after year rolled away in the deep seclusion of Myrtle's home. Yet even in the quiet manner of her living she could not escape entirely the admiration which her beauty excited. More than one man, good and true, would have considered it the dearest privilege of his life to have brought the flush of love and hope back to the pearly cheek, the light to the downcast eye—to have persuaded her to lay aside the black weeds which she always wore, for the bridal white more befitting her youth. It was the common belief that the sudden and awful manner of her husband's death had grieved her too terribly for her heart to recover itself. But had the truth been known, it would have told a different story—it would have shown that heart a hopeless mourner over the grave of another love. The suitors who plead to be allowed to brighten her future years, honored the constancy which drove them to despair—but they did not suspect that it was a constancy to the living, not the dead.

Occasionally Myrtle dreamed wild dreams of the possibility of Hugh returning to her, now that her husband was dead. If, indeed, he had loved her so much, would he not return to her, with the wish to restore their former relations? Oh, if she could see him now, she would sink at his feet and compel him to pity and pardon the doubt and pride which had led to their estrangement. Then, over the mad, fond vision would sweep the cloud and shut it from sight—Hugh would never seek her, never trust her, who, he believed, had trifled with and betrayed his love. More than once she formed the resolution to seek him out and explain to him the circumstances which caused her hasty marriage. These would not excuse her guilt and folly in wedding a man she did not love; but they would prove her neither so false nor so fickle as she had seemed.

Upon these circumstances there fell, after a few years, a startling light which made plain all that had been doubtful to Mrs. Sherwood. Of course, all the possessions of the little family which they had with them in their wagon, at the time of their capture by the Indians, were lost; but among the property left behind for future transportation was a chest of

her husband's papers, which was afterward delivered to her. These papers she had never fully examined, as there was supposed to be nothing valuable among them; but one day, when oppressed by intolerable loneliness, to drive from her mind the thought of her lost child, her blighted life, her present weariness, she unlocked the chest and began turning over the various bundles with no other purpose than to pass away the lagging hours. Presently her attention was arrested by a package of old letters, post-marked New Orleans and directed in Hugh's handwriting to Charles Sherwood.

It is said that "murder will out." There certainly is a strange infatuation which possesses those who commit crime to preserve the tokens of their guilt as it were for their own conviction. It must have been this peculiar influence which induced Mr. Sherwood to treasure up these letters which he more naturally, it would be supposed, had committed to the flames.

Myrtle's heart gave a bound, and then stood still. She lifted up the package with a nervous hand, letting it fall into her lap. The past rushed over her as vividly as if it were yesterday those letters were penned. It was some time before she could venture to untie the faded ribbon which bound them. Even then she hesitated. There might be things in those pages which Hugh would not have wished her to see—which her husband himself would have withheld from her. It was from no idle curiosity she wished to read them—it was from an agonizing desire to ascertain for herself the reasons for Hugh's silence, and if the suspicions she had entertained of her husband's guilt in the matter were correct.

While she hesitated, the bundle in her lap falling apart, revealed a smaller package folded within, the superscriptions of which were to her maiden name. The truth flashed over her, sudden and blinding as the lightning from heaven. Her head sunk on her breast; for a time she felt as she did on that fearful wedding-day, when she looked up after the ceremony to meet the silent question in the eyes of Hugh.

After an hour of motionless apathy, she seized those letters once so wildly looked for and waited for in vain, pressing them to her lips and heart. One by one she read them all and ever and over. Sitting there on the floor of her little

chamber, with the gold of sunset streaming in upon her head, she forgot that she was not Myrtle Vail, seventeen, betrothed, reading the messages of him who was longing to fly to her side, to make her his wife. She forgot that she was Mrs Sherwood, a widow, loveless and lonely. In the joy and excitement of her dream, she looked again almost the young maiden; rich roses flushed her cheeks, her eyes swam in lustrous tears, and tender smiles flitted over her face as she hung over the impassioned avowals of her lover. How little had the writer foreseen the fate of those letters, when he, eager and expectant, had poured out his soul in them—that now and here, for the first time, the eyes for which they were intended, should rest upon them. Could Hugh have seen her then, as she blushed along the lines, as she kissed his name at the closes, those ten weary years would have been swept out of their lives—all would have been well. Alas! the light faded in the sunset sky, and from the face of the woman who had been lost in this sweet dream the light faded, the night came—no spirit went between them to warn Hugh of what might still be—he, too, on the western prairie, watched the stars come up, while the child of Myrtle fell asleep on his knee, her fair hair blowing across his breast.

For weeks after this, her aunt was alarmed for the health of Myrtle. The excitement had been almost too great for her; she was much prostrated. The human heart can hardly continue its daily burden without sympathy; and to this kind counselor Myrtle revealed the letters, and perhaps, in thus sharing her feelings with another, prevented the illness which seemed to threaten her. Distressed as she was at the evidence of the sin of one now dead, and far removed either from her anger or forgiveness—filled with deep regret at her own want of faith and the folly of her hasty marriage—there was yet a strange happiness to her in this confirmation of Mr. Fielding's love, this certainty that he had been true. Those precious, ill-fated missives were cherished as fondly as ever love-letters were.

Finally, with the approval of her aunt, she concluded to address a letter to Mr. Fielding, stating the feeling under which she had committed the rash act which had destroyed their happiness, explaining the false part his friend had

played, and asking him if he would visit her where ~~she~~ resided. She did not know his address; the last she had heard of him he was in Europe, but he might have returned to New York, where, he being so well known, the post-office officials would probably deliver the letter to his friends, in case of his absence, and they would forward it to him. At least it was worth a trial. So the word was sent. Myrtle looked long for an answer, which never came. At times she would believe he was far away, and had not received it; again her face would burn with blushes to think how clearly her missive had betrayed that she loved him still, when he, perhaps, utterly condemned her, or had forgotten her. Gradually all hope faded out. Hugh Fielding became to her as one dead, whose memory was sacredly cherished. The calm of resignation had settled over her life, when, suddenly, she was startled out of all calm, all rest, by chance tidings of the child she had mourned as lost for so many years. Her aunt was too aged and enfeebled now to accompany her; but she, scarcely sleeping or eating, set out on her journey, resolved to trace up the faint clue to its starting-point—to find her child or to satisfy herself that it had really perished. Thus it was she had been down to Wakwaka, and had found there more than she had anticipated.

It is not strange that, with all this long record to go over, the reunited lovers talked until Myrtle the second was fast asleep in the arm-chair, and the gray of dawn began to obscure the stars looking in at the window. Myrtle the second, yawning and peeping sleepily through half-shut lids, regarded the couple upon the sofa as rather old—quite beyond the delightful era of romance and passion. Oh, if *they* could guess how she and John felt—if they could only be in love! Ah, little girl, these older lovers walked this night in a world of sentiment and feeling as fresh as ever opened to more youthful feet. They had gone back over the past, and taken up their youth again.

“Myrtle, see, *our little girl* is fast asleep. She will take cold, with no shawl over her. The stars, too, are fading. I must say good-night, but I shall come back soon for your decision.”

Myrtle, junior, was shaken gently out of a delightful dream

into which she had gilded—a dream of her papa, Fielding, who, coming to place a wreath of white roses in her hair, turned suddenly, as he approached, into John Jones, artist, who bent over and was just about to—what? She never knew, for at that moment mamma Sherwood drew her out of her dream most provokingly, and they went to their bedroom together by the pale light of the morning star.

Poor John! could *his* fortunes receive such a sudden gilding as had Mr. Fielding's, how well it would enable our story to end. But no one knew his present whereabouts, or what was in store for him, and Myrtle dropped to sleep with a sigh.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HAPPY CONSUMMATION.

MYRTLE did not return with Mrs. Dennison that afternoon, but the rest of that day and evening were spent with her newly-found mother, in a private parlor of the hotel.

"Isn't it odd? I wish you could wear my wedding-dress, mother, but I guess it will hardly fit you."

"And if it would, it would scarcely be appropriate. It will not be long before you will need it yourself, I fear!"

It was Myrtle's turn now to blush.

"Seven o'clock. Hugh was to be here at seven;" and the lady looked at the tiny watch in her belt as impatiently as if she were sweet sixteen, instead of fair and forty.

"And here he is," said he, stepping in at the moment.

"I have come for your answer, Mrs. Sherwood. You know you arrived just in time to help me out of an embarrassing dilemma. The cards are all out for a wedding—shall there be one—or must there be cake baked to no purpose? Dinah will be in despair, and everybody disappointed. I, for one, shall go wild with disappointment."

"It seems a strange exchange," murmured the blushing widow, looking at her lovely daughter.

"But appropriate, I am convinced," continued the gentleman.

"Oh, mamma, do not refuse. You expect to consent sometime, and the sooner the better. It will be so charming! We will surprise every one! I will not even confide it to Mrs. Dennison. No one will know who the bride really is to be, until we take our places upon the floor. I will wear my dress, and be your bride-maid. Oh! I think it will be very charming!" Hugh looked at her radiant countenance; he had not seen her so much like her own self since he had refused to her the relation of father; he realized more vividly than ever what a foolish thing he would have done to have shadowed and chilled that sunny brightness.

"If it's jealousy of your daughter which causes you to hesi

late, I assure you that I have had no intention of marrying her;" here both the ladies showed their surprise in their expression. "But let me sit here, on this sofa, where I can talk at ease, and I'll tell you all about it. I was just on the point of explaining myself to this little girl here, when *you* come to the rescue, my dear lady. You must know that I overheard a certain tear-bedewed and magnificently-heroic interview between two good looking young people, who mutually avowed their willingness to break their own hearts, and their firm determination to secure the happiness of a certain selfish old bachelor at the price of all their hopes, wishes, and peace of mind generally."

"Why, Mr. Fielding!" murmured the youngest listener.

"Not being minded to permit such suicidal proceedings, and being touched by the degree of devotion shown for the wretched old bachelor, I secretly interested myself in their case. The youth was about to fly the country, but I detained him by force of a contract which I held between us, thinking that when the time had come to sacrifice the ogre who—"

"Now, father, I won't hear to such slander," again interrupted the young girl, and he felt a soft hand upon either cheek, and a kiss impeded the progress of his narrative.

"Who stood between them and felicity, that I should need his aid in carrying out my little plot, which was nothing less romantic than to lead the mourning bride before the priest, only to act as god-father, and give her away to the melancholy youth, suddenly summoned from the slough of despond to the mountain-top of happiness."

"Is it possible?" again interposed the wondering voice.

"I confess now, that there was a touch of the dramatic in my little scheme; but it consoled me for my own loss, and gave me comfort and amusement in dreaming it out, when, otherwise, I might have been falling into a decline. However, my pretty plot was all disarranged by the flight of the principal actor, and I was in a fine state of alarm and perplexity when your Ladyship appeared upon the stage. I was actually afraid that I should have to marry the little minx myself, to stop the gossips who had been invited, and to keep the bride-cake from being a total loss!"

"What a delightful man you are, Mr. Fielding! If John only knew of it," murmured Myrtle to herself, in a whisper.

"What did you say, my child?"

"Oh, nothing, papa. I was just thinking—"

"What a pity it was that John had run away. It is a pity, indeed. We might have two weddings in one, and save time, trouble, and expense, you know."

"What is the name of this future son-in-law of mine?" asked Mrs. Sherwood, with a smile.

"John Jones, Jr.," answered Mr. Fielding. "A beautiful name," he added, maliciously, "very aristocratic, and to a romantic young girl, I should think it would be enough of itself. Some of his relatives are fashionable people. That was his aunt I introduced to you, in the cabin, Mrs. Sherwood."

"What's in a name?" asked Myrtle, with a flushing cheek. "I'd marry a man, if I loved him, if his name was Nebuchadnezzar. And as for his aunt, she's as warm-hearted and excellent a woman as there is in the world. She'd be much truer to me in sickness or misfortune than any of these 'fashionable relatives' would. John is poor now, dear mother, but he will soon be independent, if not rich, with his genius—for he has genius, mamma—and I love him, which is enough. There's nothing should ever induce a young girl to marry except love—"

"Or duty," interposed Mr. Fielding.

"I don't know," answered Myrtle, "I may have carried my sense of duty too far—I think now I did. No matter—I know you will love John, and be proud of him, mamma."

"I don't doubt it, my darling. I wish he were here this evening. I shall be the last person to oppose you upon grounds of riches or policy. It was that part, played by deception, which blighted my life," she sighed, and looked away sadly, as at a dreary past which she saw in space before her.

"Do not talk of blight," said Hugh; "your life shall blossom again. We will forget that we are not as young as Myrtle and John. We will think it is in frolic only that we call them our children—as little girls do their dolls,"—she smiled—"and now, I take it for granted, that I have your consent to have the arrangements proceed."

Mrs. Dennison was surprised at the excessive lightness of spirits of her fair charge the day preceding the wedding. Brides elect are usually thoughtful, if not positively mel-

anxiety, at the near approach of so important an event, but Myrtle was like a thistle-down, dancing upon a summer breeze. No one was made acquainted with the fact that the lady at the hotel was her mother; Mrs. Sherwood passed for an intimate friend of Mr. Fielding's, who had been invited to the coming festival.

At last the important evening arrived; gay parties went from Wakwaka out to the brilliantly-illuminated new mansion where the ceremony was to be performed. The large parlors were thronged; curiosity and interest were at the height; the usual buzz and flutter which precedes the entrance of the bridal-party took place. To Mrs. Dennison was assigned the honor of receiving the guests—a situation she was eminently qualified to fill gracefully. That lady herself was not entirely at ease in her mind. She was too keen an observer not to see that something mysterious was hovering about. When she had stepped into Myrtle's dressing-room to herself put the finishing touches to her toilet, the young girl had playfully refused to have her veil put on.

"Wait until the last moment," she said; "Mrs. Sherwood will arrange it for me, if I wish it."

Mrs. Dennison cast a jealous look at that lady, and retired. It was no wonder that she felt hurt to find herself supplanted by this stranger, after years of motherly care of her pupil. Besides, the lady was about her own age, and much handsomer; she was obliged to confess to herself that Mrs. Sherwood was beautiful, as she saw her that evening, flitting about Myrtle, arranging her hair and dress. She wore, the strange lady did, a rich full dress of dove-color, without any ornament, save her own splendid hair, fastened with a gold comb, and decked with a few scarlet flowers. A flush, as soft and fitful as that of youth, hovered on her cheeks, and her eyes were brilliant and tender.

"You look lovely to-night, mother," whispered Myrtle.

There was but one thing which dissatisfied the young girl now; which was the absence of her own lover, whom she wanted to stand with her as groomsman, she being bride-maid to her mother. In his place she was obliged to accept a young gentleman of the village, agreeable and graceful enough, and only not perfect because he was not John Jones.

When the bridal-party came into the thronged parlors, and silence fell upon the assembly, surprise was the one emotion with which the guests beheld Hugh Fielding taking as his wife that strange lady by his side, unknown to every one of them, and Myrtle playing the part of bridesmaid.

One person there was in that throng with whom surprise was also infinite joy. Standing out upon the portico, too eager to enter, not wishing to be seen, yet unable to stay away, lingered John Jones, who had returned to the scenes of his disappointment upon the day set to seal his unhappiness, thinking that he would steal one secret glance at the bride, in her beauty, then retreat to darkness and solitude, without disturbing her serenity by a sight of his wretchedness.

But as this meaning change in the programme dawned upon him, he lingered in a dream of joy, doubting his senses, obtruding further through the window into the room.

"Law suz!" exclaimed Mrs. Jones, who had made her way forward to congratulate "the happy pair," and to express her wonder at the turn events had taken; "if there ain't John a peeking in the window!"

"You don't say so! nothing could be more fortunate! run, child, and get your veil," exclaimed Mr. Fielding.

The blushing youth was dragged in by the exultant bridegroom, regardless of traveling attire, or stammered excuses; Myrtle's timid refusals were set at naught.

"This night, or never, his bride thou shalt be!" cried Hugh. Some one brought the bridal veil and orange wreath from the chamber; the young pair stood up, and before they could realize their own delicious, unexpected happiness, they were receiving congratulations as Mr. and Mrs. John Jones.

Need any thing further be said of all the world of conjecture and romantic gossip which floated about that evening! That double wedding is still fresh in the memory of the guests, and the history of the beautiful Child of the Prairie is cherished among the annals of the city of Wakwaka.

THE END.

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